

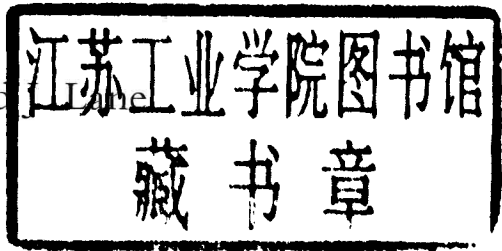
THEMES IN 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE & CULTURE

richard j. lane

# the postcolonial novel

# The Postcolonial Novel

Richard D. Lane



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# Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is written for readers who are encountering postcolonial literatures for the first time. I take an historical approach, examining some (and only *some*) of the key novels in the western reception and reading of postcolonial literatures. I read the novels closely, often quite conventionally, to enable beginning readers to engage with the texts themselves and with some of the critical debates that emerged from study of these texts. A more sophisticated theoretical discourse is used at times, but my basic thesis is that such a discourse was developed because of the groundbreaking work of the novelists (not the other way round). This book is written to encourage more advanced debate, in the process of which this text will be necessarily critiqued, abandoned or cast aside. My privileging of a few key novels may appear arbitrary, if not oppressive, yet the selection is made precisely because of the impact that these novels not only once had, but *continue to have*. In other words, while other selections can be added to, or even replace, these novels – for example, if one were to construct a history of feminist postcolonial literatures, or Marxist postcolonial literatures, and so on – I still contend that these novels were of immense importance to the development of the diverse ways in which we ‘do English’, to steal Robert Eaglestone’s phrase; in other words, to the ways in which *we still ‘do English’*.<sup>1</sup> I have focused on the novel genre because of the ways in which postcolonial novels in English have had a rapid, global impact via the international book market. As academic postcolonial departments have become more established in universities throughout the world, a huge amount of research has been produced with focus on other genres, revealing how more performative texts (poetry and drama), for example, and new hybrid texts/genres are of immense importance for indigenous peoples around the world. My focus on the novel genre is in no way meant as an ignoring or forgetting of other genres and emerging modes of writing; elsewhere I have paid particular attention to the immensely creative and powerful resurgence of contemporary Canadian First Nations drama and ritual.<sup>2</sup>

I could not have written this book without the support of my wife Sarah: I dedicate this book to her. I am indebted to John Thieme, who introduced

me to the study of postcolonial literatures, and to Deborah Madsen, who has continued to support my research in this area. For research support at the University of Debrecen, thanks go to Tamas Benyei, Nora Sellei and Peter Szaffko; in England, Andrea Drugan, Rod Mengham and Robert Eaglestone were of particular assistance; in Canada Sherrill Grace continues to inspire, and for an alternative perspective on the literatures of the Pacific Northwest, thanks go to Laurie Ricou. Some of my research for this book was first presented at the University of Turin, where I received much support from Carmen Concilio. I would also like to thank the staff of the British Library, London, the Koerner Library and Main Library of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and Malaspina University-College Library, Vancouver Island. Joseph Jones, Librarian Emeritus at the University of British Columbia, was also of great assistance.

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# 1 Introducing the Postcolonial Novel in English

## Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*

### A NOTE ON BEGINNINGS

All of the novels discussed in this study have had a strong impact upon contemporary literary critical thought either in the field of postcolonial studies or more generally in literary studies and beyond. This book focuses on the postcolonial novel in English<sup>1</sup> because it also explores the diverse ways in which postcolonial novels have engendered a rethinking of theory in the English-speaking academic communities of Europe and North America. This is not to argue that such a rethinking is necessarily the most important – or the only – consequence of the publication of these particular novels; rather, it is merely *one* of the outcomes of postcolonial literary production, albeit a decisive one for those involved in the criticism of literary texts. Subsequently, the critical discourse used here is tied in with and in many cases traced ‘back’ to its literary precursors, rather than the literary texts being presented as mere ‘examples’ of theoretical concepts. Such a tracing is (it is hoped) not done too naïvely, i.e., it is achieved with an awareness of Nietzsche’s, Foucault’s and Said’s work on ‘genealogy’ and ‘beginnings’ – that is to say, an awareness that ‘the metaphysical “origin” is privileged, mythical and transcendent, asserting a point of universal truth, whereas the secular “beginning” is contingent, ceaselessly re-examined (and re-begun), restructuring and animating new ways of conceiving the world.’<sup>2</sup> The question of ‘precursors’ is thus one which may appear strangely reversed to those versed in the complexities and densities of literary theory: to put it simply, in this critical book, the novels take priority.

### PALACE OF THE PEACOCK: A FIRST READING

Beginning, then, again . . . is to begin, always, with a novel: in this chapter, Wilson Harris’s *Palace of the Peacock*.<sup>3</sup> Wilson Harris was born in British Guiana in 1921; the country is now called Guyana after gaining independence on 26 May 1966. Harris emigrated to England in 1959, but his fiction remains deeply rooted in the transformational possibilities of the landscapes and peoples of Guyana. Because of the experimental and challenging nature

of Harris's writing, the first main question asked in this study is: 'how do we read *Palace*?' The opening section of the first chapter narrates the death of an otherwise unidentified 'horseman', followed by a strange reversal – the first-person narrator (the 'I') declares that 'The sun blinded and ruled my living sight but the dead man's eye remained open and obstinate and clear' (19). The living narrator appears to have lost sight, while the dead 'horseman' keeps his 'eye' open. Whose vision will narrate this novel, or to ask this another way, who will be the focalizer? As Jakob Lothe summarizes: 'If the narrative perspective is *internal* [inside the story world], the point of orientation will as a rule be linked to a character. The reader has no choice but to see the fictional events with the eyes of this character.'<sup>4</sup> But what if there is a situation where the narrator is a character inside the story world, presenting that world through the eyes (or seeing eye) of another character? In this case we would say that the other character is the focalizer.<sup>5</sup> In the second section of chapter one of *Palace*, the narrator dreams of a surreal and schizophrenic mode of vision: 'I awoke [in the dream] with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye' (19). Now the opening section appears to be repeated by the dream, where the narrator has somehow internalized the dead man's open eye, the 'one dead seeing eye'. Suddenly, the horseman appears in the dream, and we learn more about the two modes of vision or focalization: 'And we looked through the window of the room together as though through his dead seeing material eye, rather than through my living closed spiritual eye' (20). The juxtaposition of 'dead' with 'seeing' and then 'living' with 'closed' creates an interpretive friction when compounded by the opposition of 'material' and 'spiritual' eyes. The phrases 'dead-closed-material' and 'living-seeing-spiritual' would appear to make sense. Perhaps the *actual* phrases used – i.e., 'dead-seeing-material' and 'living-closed-spiritual' – signify the differences between a material and a spiritual vision, where the former deals with externals and objects, the latter with the internal world of visions, dreams and the soul.<sup>6</sup> 'Closed' could thus mean 'solipsistic' or 'hermetic' (sealed in) yet intensifying the spiritual; 'open' could thus mean 'sensuous' yet unthinking. We read on to try to decipher further, only to learn that the narrator has given the 'horseman' a name – Donne<sup>7</sup> – and that Donne is abusive towards another character, called Mariella. Again there is a repetition of being blinded, but this time, it is Mariella's gaze that does the damage: 'She was staring hard at me. I turned away from her black hypnotic eyes as if I had been blinded by the sun, and saw inwardly in the haze of my blind eye a watching muse and phantom whose breath was on my lips' (21). Not only does Mariella's gaze have the power to blind, but she is responsible for killing Donne. After this dream sequence, the narrator wakes in a 'blinding light' (21). We discover that Donne is the narrator's brother, and that he is still alive; Mariella appears to be in a troubled relationship with Donne, and the encroaching blindness of one of the narrator's eyes is a 'fact' in the narrative present (the waking sequences). By the end



of the chapter, all of the contradictions and repetitions of the first sections appear to be resolved, although in explaining and clarifying his own dream state, the narrator once again repeats the basic narrative of vision and blindness.

What is this opening chapter of *Palace* about? We might now think that we can distinguish between dream sequences and waking sequences. But returning to the opening section of the chapter, it also appears to be written in the narrative present, and it is not framed by any devices to indicate that it is describing a dream, a fantasy or a vision: 'A horseman appeared on the road coming at a breakneck stride. A shot rang out suddenly' (19), and so on. There are two sentences in this first section that do not appear to make much sense: first, 'The shot had pulled me up and stifled my own heart in heaven'; and second, 'The sun blinded and ruled my living sight but the dead man's eye remained open and obstinate and clear' (19). The phrase 'pulled me up' could mean 'startled me, made me rise from a sleeping or resting position' – but that seems a weak interpretation of a phrase that is far more powerful once conjoined with 'and stifled my own heart in heaven' (whatever that might mean). The statement 'The sun blinded and ruled my living sight' is possibly understandable, except for the fact that the narrator is looking down at a dead man, so it appears to refer to a general case (the sun always blinds and rules the narrator's sight) rather than the specific instance of performing *this* particular action. The narrator is not just writing, in this opening section, in the narrative present, he is not just referring to the events he is apparently witnessing and partaking of; there is an overlaying of information, the information that concerns the present events being overlayed by the information that makes bigger, but less comprehensible claims about the narrator's heart and sight.

By the end of the chapter we can reassess this opening section of *Palace*: it may simply be the dream itself, or it may be something more powerful than a dream, such as a prophetic vision. We are still not sure. Are we, as readers, prepared for such an indeterminate text? Can we trust this narrator? Is the way in which he presents us with ambiguous and indeterminate fragments of dreams and other unidentified sequences a sign that he is an unreliable narrator? Writing one year after the publication of *Palace*, Wayne C. Booth argues that '[w]hen the novelist chooses to deliver his facts and summaries as though from the mind of one of his characters, he is in danger of surrendering precisely 'that liberty of transcending the limits of the immediate scene' – particularly the limits of that character he has chosen as his mouthpiece.'<sup>8</sup> Further, 'it is enough to say that a fact, when it has been given to us by the author or his unequivocal spokesman, is a very different thing from the same "fact" when given to us by a fallible character in the story.'<sup>9</sup> The transition in Booth's argument, from fact to "fact", reveals that the stable world of the author's 'unequivocal spokesman' gives way, with the unreliable first-person narrator, to a fluid world of uncertainty and lack of direction. Thus, as Andrew Gibson summarizes a whole batch of concerns

related to this transition identified by Booth: 'Novels can no longer offer directives which tell us about the way people are and how to discriminate amongst them.'<sup>10</sup> Or to put this another way, the first-person narrator in *Palace* does *not* appear to offer the reader a stable perspective from which 'the truth' of the situation(s) being narrated can be measured. Does this matter? Contemporary readers are often familiar with more than straightforward realism, i.e., with: self-reflexive and playful genre fiction; post-modern novels that suspend all certainties and eschew grand narratives; magic realism; multimedia texts, and so on; in other words, the move from conventional realism to the fictionality of fiction, fabulation or metafiction.<sup>11</sup> What appeared dangerous to Booth may now appear not exactly normal, but certainly not unexpected.<sup>12</sup> But that is not to say that *Palace* is not unsettling or disturbing, especially as the brief reading above is just *one* way of attempting to interpret the first chapter. Where the above brief reading ended was with the certainty that narrational ambiguities had been cleared up: there is a dream text (the murdered Donne, whose sight *may* provide focalization, etc.) and there is a real text, however it is defined (say, the perspective of the narrator), but at the least the real text is seen as being an *awakened* state. And so the reader reads on.

Chapter two begins with a description of a map: 'The map of the savannahs was a dream. The names Brazil and Guyana were colonial conventions I had known from childhood' (24). The map is instantly questioned and undermined by the narrator as it is given the status of a dream or a set of 'colonial conventions'; the map represents a fantasy, projected onto a land before eyes were even set on it by the colonizers, such as the map of the Pacific Northwest in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Who designed the map? Which colonizers? Was it the Spanish explorers, or the Dutch – their first settlement of Guyana was in 1616 – was it the Dutch West India Company, or was it the British, who settled from 1746, the French, who gained power in the region in the 1780s, or the British again, who controlled 'British Guiana' from 1831 to 1966? Is it possible to strip away the colonial mapping to find an essential country underneath? Or would this be an effacement of the hybrid ethnic groups that are an integral part of the cultural make-up of the nation? To put this another way, the economics of Guyana under colonial powers involved producing wealth through slavery, indenture and the concomitant economic migration: all of the peoples historically involved in this process create or contribute to a complex national identity. The narrator of *Palace* appears to acknowledge this complexity by clinging to the 'colonial conventions' even as they are questioned by giving them such a name:

I clung to them [the colonial conventions] now as to a curious necessary stone and footing, even in my dream, the ground I knew I must not relinquish. They were an actual stage, a presence, however mythical they seemed to the universal and the spiritual eye. They were as close to me as my ribs, the rivers and the

flatland, the mountains and heartland I intimately saw. I could not help cherishing my symbolic map, and my bodily prejudice like a well-known room and house of superstition within which I dwelt. I saw this kingdom of man turned into a colony and battleground of spirit, a priceless tempting jewel I dreamed I possessed. (24)

The 'colonial conventions' which, claim, interpret, irrevocably change and map the country are in competition with a personal bodily response to the country, the merging of organic geological features with individual physiology. The phrase 'heartland' links intimately with love of this land at physiological and spiritual levels, which merge to form the 'symbolic map'. From the latter perspective, the 'colonial conventions' are 'mythical' – yet they also function as 'an actual stage, a presence'. In other words, current-day actors involved in this part of South America still perform their actions with more than a colonial backdrop; it forms the very stage 'boards' – or ground – upon which they tread. The increasing sense of unreality interwoven with points of reality that Harris so beautifully builds throughout the opening pages of *Palace* is something that also concerned the Algerian activist and intellectual Frantz Fanon. In Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, he describes 'a zone of occult instability',<sup>13</sup> which reaches a point whereby this interweaving needs to be forcefully resisted:

After centuries of unreality, after having wallowed in the most outlandish phantoms, at long last the native, gun in hand, stands face to face with the only forces which contend for his life – the forces of colonialism. And the youth of a colonized country, growing up in an atmosphere of shot and fire, may well make a mock of, and does not hesitate to pour scorn upon the zombies of his ancestors, the horses with two heads, the dead who rise again, and the djinns who rush into your body while you yawn. The native discovers reality and transforms it into the pattern of his customs, into the practice of violence and into his plan for freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Fanon's ghosts are 'superstitions' and indigenous ways of perceiving the world that can be reclaimed and transformed at the moment of resisting the forces of colonialism. While the narrator of *Palace* does not advocate violence, he does narrate the violence characteristic of Donne, and the geological 'violent din' (25) of the rapids being negotiated on the river journey. 'Reality' and 'unreality' are complex deliberately unstable reference points for Harris, whereas Fanon wants to end such instability once and for all in the name of direct action. Harris approaches the 'colonial conventions' from an aesthetic perspective, whereas Fanon approaches them from the perspective of the political activist – it is important to distinguish between the two discursive modes (even given the fact that they sometimes share rhetorical strategies and devices).

The introduction of the river journey and the crew in *Palace* is evocative of one of the most contested novellas of postcolonial studies, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As John Thieme notes, *Palace*

follows in Conrad's footsteps by taking its protagonists, a mixed crew representative of the various ancestral strands of the Guyanese population, or more generally of the crew of mankind, on a journey upriver into the country's continental heartland. . . . In one sense . . . the interior journey of *Palace of the Peacock* retraces that of *Heart of Darkness* and there are clear Conradian echoes, for example, when the Kurtz-like protagonist Donne remembers a house he has built 'with the closeness and intimacy of a horror and a hell, that horror and that hell he had himself elaborately constructed from which to rule his earth'. (130)<sup>15</sup>

By rewriting and recasting Conrad's novella, Harris is intervening in the western literary tradition and a contested vision of Africa. As Ania Loomba puts it:

There [in *Heart of Darkness*] Africa is a primeval jungle and a source of power and wealth which fascinates and maddens the colonialist hero Kurtz. . . . Marlow journeys down the river Congo, into the 'heart of darkness,' in search of Kurtz, whose experiences are recreated as simultaneously a journey into childhood, madness and Africa. Although several critics regard Kurtz's dislocation as a product of colonialist greed, and the novel as a critique of imperialism, it can be seen to rehearse the primitivism of classical psychoanalysis. Chinua Achebe (1989) called it 'a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question'. In this novel as in much colonialist fiction, Africa is a place where the European mind disintegrates and regresses into a primitive state.<sup>16</sup>

The interpretive questions in Loomba's summary are balanced neatly between *Heart of Darkness* as an account of the inherent rottenness of the colonial enterprise in Africa (and beyond) and/or *Heart of Darkness* as a fundamentally racist depiction of Africa. For Edward Said, one of the problems of the novella, regardless of which side upon this interpretive divide critics fall, is that its representational structure is hermetic or self-enclosed:

. . . neither Conrad nor Marlow gives us a full view of what is *outside* the world-conquering attitudes embodied by Kurtz, Marlow, the circle of listeners on the deck of the *Nellie*, and Conrad. . . . For if we cannot truly understand someone else's experience and if we must therefore depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable.<sup>17</sup>

This textual world, closed in and controlled, is what Said calls the representational 'circularity' of the novella: ' . . . the perfect closure of the whole thing is not only aesthetically but also mentally unassailable.'<sup>18</sup> In *Palace*, Harris achieves not only an assault upon this representational circularity by producing another version of the now classic 'heart of darkness' journey, but he also resists countering Conrad with another monolithic or hermetic representational system. In other words, he counters Conrad by producing a text that is representationally fluid and open. Said calls the politics and

aesthetics of *Heart of Darkness* 'imperialist' whereas the politics and aesthetics of *Palace* are 'postcolonial' – they work against the colonialist discourses embedded in the literary canon and they open up a complex, even contradictory, vision of a nation that has a history inextricably interlinked with colonial projects. Furthermore, the 'new' way of seeing that *Palace* explores in its opening pages becomes a way of also rereading the past, be that past Conrad's novella or the colonialist mapping processes. The relationship between the western literary canon and postcolonial novels as a critique and rewriting of that canon – known more technically as the production of counter-discourse – is explored more fully in the next chapter, but for the moment it is crucial to emphasize that the intertextual relationships between canon and critique are complex; as Thieme argues: '... if counter-discourse takes up an oppositional position, it runs the risk of locking itself into the very codes that it is contesting, because it allows itself to be defined in terms of them, albeit through negation.'<sup>19</sup> Thieme notes that there is an additional twist to Harris's writing back against Conrad: that Harris regards Conrad as being 'a writer who stands on the threshold of questioning "monolithic codes of behaviour"'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, not only does *Palace* exceed the hermetically closed representational circle by offering multiple narrational perspectives, but it locates in *Heart of Darkness* the beginnings of a critique of colonialism both thematically and at the level of 'form'. For a hint concerning the latter, Fredric Jameson, discussing Conrad's *Lord Jim*, suggests that '[a] case could be made for reading Conrad not as an early modernist, but rather an anticipation of that later and quite different thing we have come to call variously textuality, *écriture*, post-modernism, or schizophrenic writing.'<sup>21</sup>

Whether the crew are dead or alive in *Palace* may contribute to a feeling of schizophrenia; at times the crew are portrayed as merely doubling a previous group of men who happen to have had the same names (26), but then at other times, they discuss the pros and cons of being dead in such a way as to bring even further questions into play: 'He had told them secretly he was a wanted man now, wanted for murder if it was known he was living. And so he wished to stay dead, he shouted, though he was perfectly alive' (56). If the reference to 'colonial conventions' at the beginning of chapter two is indicative of an actual historical context within which and through which the novel is written, then is there some kind of context for this mysterious ghostly crew? T.J. Cribb examines Harris's own past as a surveyor in Guyana to get a sense of the scientific discourses and methodologies involved in mapping the nation – discourses and methodologies which Harris already exceeded in his day-to-day duties. For example, Cribb notes that '[t]he bulk of the work of surveying is repetitive routine and hard slog, recorded in thousands of readings of angles and distances in the Level or Field Books.'<sup>22</sup> Harris recorded such readings in his first expedition to the Guyanese interior in 1942, exceeding the mere recording of facts and figures:

to record, uniquely, the humbler members of the expedition who were assisting him, holding the gauging staffs while he took the observations. . . . At the head of page fifteen of the Level Book there appear the names: 'Moore, A. da Silva, W. Schomburgh.' . . . Then Rodrigues takes over the book and adopts Harris's method, so we find on 17<sup>th</sup> November 'A. Carroll, G. Vigilance, L. De Souza'.<sup>23</sup>

As Cribb says, not only does this surveyor's book contain the original names later used as characters in *Palace*, but it also indicates the importance of their 'basis in experience.'<sup>24</sup> Surveying, mapping and naming are intricately related processes, all of which are important for the colonial project of claiming land title (and the associated mineral rights, logging rights, etc.), de-legitimizing and re-designating land use (i.e., replacing one 'improper' system of land use with another 'proper' one as defined by the colonizers), and interpreting land within radically different cultural contexts. Two Canadian examples suffice here. First, Eden Robinson, in her novel *Monkey Beach*, explains the mis-naming, the doubling and displacements of the Haisla town of Kitammat where the events of the novel are situated. Thus, Hudson's Bay traders once used Tsimshian First Nations guides whose own name – Kitamaat – for the main Haisla First Nation town means 'people of the falling snow,' and this is the name that the Hudson's Bay Company used from thereon. Then, an additional confusion arose when the Alcan Aluminium company moved into the area in the 1950s and built a workers' town which they called 'Kitimat.'<sup>25</sup> From a Haisla First Nation perspective, their own naming system – a key component of cultural identity – has been doubly displaced. The second example involves two competing names for the twin peaks of mountains overlooking the Canadian city of Vancouver: either 'The Lions' or 'The Two Sisters'. The first name refers to the Landseer Lions, the sculptures in London's Trafalgar Square, and the second name refers to First Nations mythology and culture. The fact that 'The Lions' is the name used today indicates the colonial recoding of the landscape.<sup>26</sup> In both of these examples, the processes of naming are not simple, and they do not simply draw upon empirical data – instead, they function according to chance (the guides happened to be Tsimshian that day, not Haisla) and power (the power of colonial companies to rename the environment). In writing from the position of a surveyor, Harris is rooted in multiple perspectives of the land from the very start; he reveals how surveying data, which is based upon empirical fact, can be used for myriad purposes, one of which is the writing of *Palace*. The crew – with their names based upon Harris's personal history in his surveying days – become as characters in a novel not just doubled, but somehow indeterminate to themselves. The journey into the interior, which in *Heart of Darkness* and the counter-discursive rewritings of it is seen as a psychological journey, is further rewritten by Harris via the technique of montage. In other words, the crew literally see alternative identities juxtaposed. This occurs most strongly as they re-experience the rapids that (may have) killed them the first time round, but it also occurs in summary and statement



made by the narrator. Thus 'it looked the utmost inextricable confusion to determine where they were and what they were, whether they had made any step whatever towards a better relationship – amongst themselves and within themselves – or whether it was all a fantastic chimera' (84). The substantiality of the crew derives from the montage form, the 'chimera' given substance through the crew's continual dialectical interweaving of past, present and the hoped-for future. This dialectical interweaving can also be thought of as a 'dialogue with the past'<sup>27</sup> where 'history as progress' is questioned, undermined and recast, but always with an awareness of historical complexities and as a way of teasing out new readings of the nation's formation. The image of the dead crew climbing a cliff punctured with 'windows' through which they can peer is a poetic vision<sup>28</sup> of the dialectical interweaving found throughout the novel, and this leads on in the narrative to the final 'mystical vision', which is redemptive while also being, materially speaking, an expression of failure. As Thieme argues: 'The mystical vision of community and integration symbolized by the palace of the peacock at the waterfall remains an aspiration rather than an attainment.'<sup>29</sup> In relation to the material question, Thieme argues further that '[a]s European conquistadores, Donne and his crew, who die many deaths, fail to reach the El Dorado, but on another level they do arrive at the legendary golden city, achieving a sense of spiritual and psychic harmony through a syncretist vision of an Arawak Christ that draws on natural elements common to both settler and indigene cultures.'<sup>30</sup>

What does the word 'syncretist', used above, mean? Deriving from 'syncretism', the word literally means a joining of forces. Originally used in theological writing, but also in secular theatre criticism, the transfer of the term to postcolonial literature is viewed with some suspicion.<sup>31</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define the term as one 'sometimes used to avoid the problems some critics have associated with the idea of hybridity in identifying the fusion of two distinct traditions to produce a new and distinctive whole'.<sup>32</sup> The most important word in the construction of Harris's syncretist vision in *Palace* is 'dreaming': it is the one word that connects and maintains all of the contradictions and ambiguities in the text, yet it still enables the 'fusion' of literary, national and historical traditions to remain continually in process. The etymological root of the word 'dream' takes us back to Old English and the meaning 'song'; quite late in the novel, there is a direct quotation of a fragment of a sacred song, or *Psalm*: 'It is better to be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord' (109). Prior to this direct quotation there are further allusions to this Psalm – Psalm number 84 – the huge wall of rock over which the waterfall pours can be thought of as the edge of a 'shield' or a plateau; there are countless references to the power of the sun; a swallow flies in and out of the room that Donne peers into, where the carpenter (or Messiah figure) works: all allude to key components of the Psalm, where the Christian God is compared with the sun and a shield, and a swallow nests in the Temple.<sup>33</sup> This biblical song

or poetry is part of Harris's syncretist vision: in general, to dream means different things, in different times and cultures; to take just a few possible meanings, dreaming can be a core component of indigenous spirituality (e.g., Australian aboriginal dreamtime), it can be regarded as being out-of-touch with rational reality (the common meaning of 'daydreaming' in the West), it can be a way of receiving prophetic visions and commandments (e.g., Jacob's dreams in the Old Testament) and it can be a process open to psychoanalysis (Freud's infamous *The Interpretation of Dreams* being an unsurpassed example of such an interpretive process). To disentangle ever so slightly the syncretist web, it is crucial to examine who, or what, is doing the dreaming in *Palace*. The first-person narrator describes not only his own modes of dreaming but also that of others; the word 'dreaming' is used to describe the actions of people and objects, such as 'a million dreaming miles away' (20), 'the dense dreaming jungle' (924), 'Wishrop's dreaming eternity' (33), 'the sudden dreaming fury of the stream' (62), 'one sudden leering dreaming eye' (86), 'this dreaming return to a ruling nothingness' (101) and the references to a 'dreaming shoulder' (111, 112 and 114). How can objects dream? If the action of dreaming itself is syncretic, that is, a fusion of different meanings, then objects can indeed 'dream', be they read as symbolic, as having visionary significance, or as a mystical notion of the influence of landscape on the human psyche. Such a reading of *Palace* does not stray away from its own positioning as a post-colonial text. The character named Donne is an undoubted allusion to the English metaphysical poet John Donne (1573–1631), and thus carries not only the associated baggage of John Donne's expeditions with the Earl of Essex to Cadiz and the Azores,<sup>34</sup> but also the fact that as Dean of St Paul's he famously preached on the benefits of colonization of the new world. As he said to 'the stockholders of the Virginia Company',<sup>35</sup> referring to New England: 'You shall have made this Island, which is but as the Suburbs of the old world, a Bridge, a Gallery to the new; to join all to that world that shall never grow old, the Kingdom of Heaven. You shall add persons to this Kingdom, and to the Kingdom of heaven, and add names to the Books of our Chronicles, and to the Book of Life.'<sup>36</sup> The colonizers of the Americas dreamt not just of potential riches but also of the opportunity to escape from religious intolerance and persecution in Europe; as history, unfortunately, continually repeats itself, we have since recognized that such an escape for one group of people can lead directly to the displacement and persecution of other indigenous groups.

Guyana, where *Palace* is set, has a doubled identity, with the Arawak (largely coastal-based) and Carib (based in the interior) communities initially engaged in internal struggle and displacement. The early colonizers played off diverse strengths and weaknesses in these two communities, exacerbating earlier conflicts between them. We have here a clue, however, to a new strength: that of the cross-cultural energies and diversity that emerge from this history. Relating this notion of hybridity more techni-



cally to Harris's writing (both fiction and non-fiction), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that his process-based texts are thus similarly cross-cultural:

Although Harris finds the apparent meaning of 'the word' constantly 'deferred' in a sense, and his critical practice involves the explosion of the text from the site of a 'fissure' in its apparently seamless texture, such 'deferrals' and 'fissures' are not for him, as for Derrida, the inescapable characteristics of language and textuality itself, but the ambi/valent 'limbo gateway' . . . to the de-imperialization of apparently monolithic European forms, ontologies, and epistemologies.<sup>37</sup>

This complex sentence needs some unpacking, given that it makes a number of assumptions about knowledge of deconstructive theory and other philosophical terms. The biblical tradition of the early colonizers and theorists of Empire, such as that found in the extract above from John Donne's sermon, generates what Ashcroft et al. are calling a 'monolithic European form' – that is to say, the increase in knowledge ('epistemology') and an engagement with the world through modes of being ('ontology') – which does not recognize the value of difference and diversity. This 'monolithic' form is fundamentally based upon the word-of-God, the *logos*; by utilizing logocentric discourses yet also keeping their meanings open and exposed to difference, indeed transformed by difference, Harris offers a way of countering 'imperial' modes of behaviour and thought. But why the mention, in the above quotation, of Derrida? In part, this is because Harris's methodologies appear *deconstructive*, where deconstruction is thought of as a way of revealing the potential openness of apparently closed systems such as imperialist or monolithic texts or philosophies. The relation between the historical emergence of a powerful new theory and a literary text is central to this study; often, literary texts are quoted or sampled as mere exemplars of a particular theory, but Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin notice something different:

Harris's extensive fictional explorations, which have culminated in his recent theoretical writing, chronologically overlap Derrida's investigation of the limitations of the western philosophical tradition, and the resulting development of his theory of language '*différance*'. Harris's earliest novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) predates Derrida's translation of Husserl by two years and the French publication of *Of Grammatology* . . . and *Writing and Difference* . . . by seven years. The relation between the two is therefore not one of influence but of a separate, similar, though finally diverging approach to the problem of language and meaning.<sup>38</sup>

This argument for the primacy of the literary text, as a crucible for developing radical new ways of thinking and writing, is essential if postcolonial literatures are to be regarded as culturally autonomous. Another related example of text-with-theory is the one drawn by Bart Moore-Gilbert in his engaging study called *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. Moore-Gilbert tantalizingly suggests some parallels between Wilson Harris and the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha: 'Harris's model of an