

LANDSCAPE AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE IMAGINATION: READING GUYANESE LITERATURE¹

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"The landscape is alive, it is a living text." (Wilson Harris, *Landscape of Dreams*)

The literature of Guyana shares many common features with the literatures of the islands of the English-speaking Caribbean: these have to do especially with having the same history of slavery and colonization and a common educational and literary heritage. Nevertheless readers often perceive and remark on a certain 'difference' or 'strangeness' in much of Guyanese writing. Writers like Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris are obvious examples of this, but it is probably discernible in most of the Guyanese writers. Critics and others who attempt to identify this strangeness – and its source – usually point a finger at Guyana's physical landscape. John Hearne, in an early essay on Wilson Harris called "The Fugitive in the Forest," said of the Guyana Landscape that it is:

one of the great primary landscapes of the world, and it can crush the mind like sleep. Like sleep it inspires the dreams by which we record the progress of our waking life. (141)

This suggests that the strangeness is akin to a dream-like quality of the writing, where the realistic and the representational are found to be inadequate for conveying the writer's experience.

Jeffrey Robinson in an interesting article, itself somewhat awkwardly entitled "The Guyanese-ness of Guyanese Literature," writes of being prompted to 'define' Guyanese literature by the poet A. J. Seymour:

I replied, fumbling for a word to describe our literature, that it seemed strangely mystical. I should now prefer to say that there is, in the major works by Guyanese writers, a similarity of theme and attitude. The theme is the relationship between the mind and the world and between both of these, considered as a dialectic, and time. The attitude is one that renders these relationships not so much as philosophy or theory, but as riddle or mystery. (82)

So both Hearne and Robinson come to roughly the same conclusion: the strangeness discerned in Guyanese writing is the 'dream-like' or the 'mysterious', and while Robinson does not mention landscape explicitly, as Hearne does, the 'world' that he speaks of as being confronted by the 'mind,' in his Hegelian dialectic, is the only item that could be peculiar to the Guyanese writer, and only if it refers to, or at least includes, the landscape.

It is my own argument therefore, that any perceived 'strangeness' in the writing does come about through the influence of landscape upon the writer; whether it "crushes the mind like sleep" or generates an attitude of "mystery", the landscape in the daily experience of the people, certainly shapes and conditions the response of the imagination – and this would be true of anyone, though only the writer expresses it in the form of literature. What Robinson refers to as 'attitude' is what I call here the 'language of the imagination,' that is, the myths that we live by and through which we express our concern – and by 'myth' here, I do not mean falsehood, but rather the large shaping and containing conceptions in which we package our understanding of the world. In many cases, these are myths of

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anxiety, as the world – the landscape – can appear frightening and be associated, as I will try to show, with the horrors of the past and the dangers of the present.

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of much of the Guyana landscape – to the mind that confronts it – is its size and scale, which seem beyond human needs and desires. Its relative emptiness of human population (especially in the interior) can appear to emphasize an indifference or antagonism to human life and values [Image 2]. Perhaps this is what Hearne meant by its power to ‘crush the mind.’ On the other hand the mind had to devise ways of confronting or explaining the landscape, and this is where the ‘language of the imagination’ comes in. For example, one way of dealing with the landscape is to see its indifference and emptiness and the sheer difficulty of negotiating it as as a kind of disguise or concealment – to imagine that the landscape itself harbours some secret, contains something of great value hidden at its unreachable centre. From this compensatory notion of great wealth or value probably arose the tales of Eldorado: a golden city lurking somewhere beyond the farthest point you have been able to reach. Eldorado is the original and still probably the most prominent myth associated with the Guyana Landscape.

In his book The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtifull Empyre of Guiana (first published in 1596), Walter Raleigh, although he never managed to penetrate very far into the interior of the country, insisted that the riches of Manoa surpassed anything that had been found in Peru. He writes with a curious conviction, although all that he actually saw were distant, almost inaccessible mountains [Image 3]. The only pathways into the thick forest were the rivers, and these were difficult to navigate and broken by rapids and waterfalls [Image 4]. Any place so hard to reach must have a secret or treasure to protect, the imagination insists. It is interesting to read Raleigh’s account of this territory that he barely managed to glimpse. He wrote:

Guyana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sackt, turned nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not been torn nor the virtue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance. The graves have not been opened for gold, the mines not broken with sledges nor their images pulled down out of their temples. (78)

Notice how this passage contains all the anxieties – not to mention all the male European desires of the age – for riches, for rape, for the adventure of violent destruction and desecration. I will touch again later on Raleigh’s response to the landscape, but note that everything he imagined and desired – the ‘mountain of crystall’ the lake, the golden city itself – lay deep in the interior, beyond the first rapids on the rivers, beyond the natural barriers of the waterfalls, i.e. precisely where he could not manage to go [Image 5]. Raleigh paid scant attention to the mangrove forests and the water-logged coastlands. But before I consider further the features of interior landscapes, I want to spend some time looking at those flat coastlands, where the great majority of Guyanese live and where the flat landscape has its own peculiar associations and myths and challenges to the imagination.

The most important fact about the flat alluvial plain where most of the population lives and where almost all of its agriculture takes place, is that it is below sea level – an average, they say, of eight feet below sea level. This means that the land itself has to be protected by sea-defences: the famous Guyana sea-wall. This, and the sea that is always threatening invasion, are prominent features of the coastal landscape and in the Guyanese imagination. People live with a peculiar dread of

the sea breaching the defences, over-topping the sea-wall at spring tides, flooding and destroying crops and homes [Image 6]. The invading sea creates a very powerful image suggesting danger and loss. And the threat is constant, repeated each spring tide, and reinforced in recent decades by people's awareness that the sea-defences have not always been properly maintained. If one were to compare this with an equally dangerous sea in Barbados: that which pounds against the cliffs at Ragged Point, for example, the effect is clearly very different [Image 7]. At Ragged point the sea is 'in its place', at the bottom of the cliffs – elsewhere on the island its high tides wash up on sloping beaches, with higher land rising behind them. In coastal Guyana, the sea is above the land and this is one of the many 'inversions of the normal' that haunt the Guyanese imagination. Inscribed in the landscape itself is the possibility of loss, of catastrophe – and it is not just the powerful image of the brown waves coming over the wall, but also the knowledge of the sheer effort and toil to keep the sea and the floodwaters from rain and rivers at bay. Walter Rodney, in his book The History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881 – 1965, points out the following statistics:

The Venn Sugar Commission of 1948 estimated that each square mile of cane cultivation involved the provision of 49 miles of drainage canals and ditches and 16 miles of higher-level waterways used for transportation and irrigation. The Commission noted that the original construction of these waterways must have entailed the moving of at least 100 million tons of soil. This meant that slaves moved 100 million tons of heavy, water-logged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water. (2-3)

For slaves who worked on the sugar plantations of coastal Guyana, therefore, the planting and reaping of cane must have seemed akin to holidays from the much more demanding work of digging and maintaining drainage and transportation canals.

Guyana's coastland is thus an amphibious world, its flat landscape dominated by such man-made works as walls, dams, levees, canals ditches and the cokers or sluices – all made necessary by the need to control and regulate the amount of water on the land [Image 8]. Of course, those who laboured on the coastlands during the colonial period were part of a system which did not expect them to communicate their perceptions or imaginative reactions to the landscape – nor indeed to anything else; it was not until the end of colonial rule became a possibility, towards the middle of the twentieth century, that writers began to emerge who were willing to express their perceptions of the place they called home. Before that time, for the few who wrote, real landscapes were elsewhere, it seems, and even a Guyana-born author like A. R. F. Webber, who published a novel, Those that be in Bondage (1917), has very little to say about physical landscape, although his novel is set on the coast. Curiously, Webber is more interested in landscape in his role as a historian: his Centenary History and Handbook of British Guyana (1931) contains, as illustrations, some fine water colours of coastal and interior landscapes by Guy Sharples [Image 9].

As JanMohamed points out, "the Manichean organization of Colonial society has a powerful limiting effect on its literature" (265). Landscape is, after all, part of the threatening and multifarious 'alterity' that one confronted when one tried to valorize one's position or to arrive at a sense of self or identity in Colonial Guyana. Landscape encroached on the very notion of identity: it was not simply a question of how to define self, but also how to define 'here', the physical place that one

called home? This was especially true if that place is associated with cruel, alienating and involuntary labour and with the natural disasters of invading sea and excessive rainfall causing flooding and loss of crops, difficulty of transportation and perceived dangers to life itself.

Just as the size and grandeur of the interior landscapes appear to diminish or exclude the human person, so the vastness and emptiness of parts of the coastal plain seem unwelcoming to the peasant farmer who must struggle against the forces of nature to survive. Small rice farmers who cannot afford drying floors or mechanical dryers, must use the surface of the road to dry their paddy, confining traffic to just half of the roadway [Image 10]. Apart from the strange visual effect – another instance of a kind of trespass, with yellow waves of paddy invading the dark surface of the road, just as the brown waves swept over the sea wall – it is a scene that also confesses a kind of vulnerability, the fragility of the livelihood of the farmers, who must beware of sudden storms or the uncooperative-ness of vehicles using the road. Apart from the rationally perceived dangers of flood and storm, there are the irrational fears as well: it seems to me that the coastal landscape imposes a strong sense of foreboding or dread, which causes the imagination to project onto it the supernatural dangers one encounters in the literature, such as Mittelholzer's jumbies, spirits and the restless ghosts of Dutch planters, guarding their buried canisters of gold or their unburied bones and flute. The superstitious imagination peoples the landscape with all kinds of supernatural enemies to man and to his efforts to eke out a living from the land. There is a nice list of these entities in David Dabydeen's novel Disappearance, where the protagonist, a civil engineer constructing sea-dams and canals is confronted by a populist leader of the peasant workers, who tries to warn him about these 'spirits':

"Let me see now", he says, stretching out his fingers to count the spirits, "Churile, Massacuraman, Dutchman, Moongazer, Ole Higue, Bakoo, Fairmaid, Sukhanti, Dai-Dai..."

—"You don't expect me to believe in your superstitious stories? Keep them for your low-caste illiterate folk."

Well sir, believe or not they are still waiting to trap you, drown you, gobble you, suck you . . . blind you, cripple you. That's why you will never build dam proper, because you are sophisticated city man. You moving bulldozer to gouge canal without respecting the spirit living there. If you dealing with water is Fairmaid you got to pleasure. You got to leave out food and flower by the river outlet, otherwise is drown you drown rass. If you dealing with mountain is Dai-Dai you watch out for, otherwise they eat you whole and not even spit out the bones for a decent Christian burial. . . . (33-34)

Thus, the imagination multiplies the real dangers, perhaps in order to keep the mind focussed and prepared for the worst.

Apart from the threat from the sea, the coastlands are subject at times to sudden storms which spring up over the land and explode with a violence that seems beyond the natural. Here is Wilson Harris writing (in The Far Journey of Oudin, 1961) about one such deadly storm in precisely this coastal landscape at a time when the paddy is out drying:

There was a moment's hush and stillness and one could hear a beetle walking on the ground. Then the far track of lightnings came closer, without warning, and flew into one's eye, forked and veined and vicious, flashing closer still, blindingly, again and again, and unrolling

into a webbed hand and foot like a crumpled flying napkin and sheet, on which the sacred embryonic beasts of the sky crouched. The table of creation began to dislodge itself and to fall with the greatest crash.

Rajah was working in fury and helplessness. He was laying numerous bags over the paddy and upon the heaps that stood around, when his last devouring moment came. He looked up in dazed alarm, like a man in a crucial X-ray that exposes the contents he had consumed and stomached. The pole to which his oxen were tied had split as if pierced by a fork and an arrow. The pieces sprang apart, still hinged to their grain and base, and they snapped together again, half-askew, like lock-jaw in a wooden dreaming instant. There was no pain save this electrification and fracture; Rajah was dead in a flash. He stiffened and fell senseless to the ground. . . .

The rain grew solemnly from the ground up, rather than falling from the clouds down, an enormous inverted theatre and curtain, upon which rose the webbed dreams of bird and beast the sky had unloaded on the lightning earth. (88-89)

It is possible to see, in the description of the storm, the way in which acute observation is embellished first by imagery ("like a crumpled flying napkin") and then by more radical flights of imagination, ending with the "embryonic beasts of the sky" and the overturning of the "table of creation." In the final paragraph, the world becomes an inverted theatre as the floodwaters mirror the sky. The whole scene depends in every sense, however, upon the flat, featureless, exposed landscape and the experience of such storms, to which it is subject.

Part of the disorientation of flood waters is the fact that they obscure the dams and boundaries between fields and make it impossible to discern the difference between flooded lands and deep canals: everything is reduced to a sheet of water mirroring the sky as in the Harris quote. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why, for coastal Guyanese, boundaries are very important for marking and defining spaces. The sea-wall is itself the biggest boundary, preserving the land from the chaos of the sea [Image 11]. The coastlanders themselves – most Guyanese, in fact – live in the relatively narrow space between the sea and the forrested backlands behind the fields. They occupy a liminal space and it can perhaps be argued that they express a liminal imagination: an imagination which dwells on the threshold between reality and dream. The seawall itself features prominently in the work of Guyana's foremost poet, Martin Carter. His poem "Sunday Night" explores the notion of boundaries and liminal spaces:

This night is me
I walk the wall of life:
Sand is out there and little crabs that hide,
Sky is up there and yellow piece of moon
City's down yonder like a shabby church. (51)²

Notice that the poet is walking on the sea-wall between the sea and the city, but he is also on a kind of vertical mid-point as well, between the "piece of yellow moon," which is "up there" and the city, which is "down yonder." It is the privileged position of the artist, which makes him more aware of what is going on. The poem continues:

²All subsequent Carter quotes are from this book.

The night is me
 I walk the wall of life:
 The congregation only hears the priest
 But more I hear – the clicking of the rat
 Gnawing that holy altar comes to me.

The confinement within physical spaces – behind physical boundaries – becomes for Carter an imprisonment within mental attitudes, as though landscape has invaded the mind. The poet, contemplating this condition, says that it “draws his heart” and “husks it to a shell.” But, typically with Carter, there comes a point where the boundaries are breached and revolutionary forces are unleashed. The dry husk of the poet’s heart is perfect kindling for the revolutionary fire; the poem concludes:

This night is me
 I walk the wall of life:
 This wall is stone and iron heels of anger
 kick sparks into my husk and shell of darkness
 till flesh ignite and burn in black and red.

Again, in the poem “Black Friday, 1962,” a poem about a day of riot when a large section of Georgetown’s commercial district was burned down, Carter resorts to the sea-wall image. After daring to wonder whether the day’s events signalled the beginning of a revolution, he remembers a lesson from the sea-wall:

Behind a wall of stone beside this city,
 mud is blue-grey when ocean waves are gone,
 in the midday sun!
 And I have seen some creatures rise from holes
 and claw a triumph like a citizen
 and reign until the tide! (117)

Is the reign of the people to be as ephemeral as that of the mud-crabs on the foreshore between tides? The vision of glory can easily turn into a vision of despair, as he continues:

Atop the iron roof-tops of this city
 I see the vultures practising to wait.
 And everytime and anytime,
 in sleep or sudden wake, nightmare, dream,
 always for me the same vision of cemeteries, slow
 funerals
 broken tombs, and death designing all.

This is also perhaps a good example of what Robinson calls “the unconscious subversiveness of the imagination” (83). Carter would dearly have liked to proclaim Black Friday as a moment of liberation when, as he says “a city of clerks/turned a city of men,” but in full optimistic flow the imagination (the sea-wall image) pulls the poet and the poem in another direction. The language of the imagination (the poet’s attitude towards his observations of the world) asserts its autonomy and speaks its own message.

Another powerful example of the sea-wall as boundary is provided in a painting by Stanley Greaves called “Election Boundary” – part of his series of political/satirical paintings entitled “There is a Meeting here Tonight” [Image 12]. The symbolism of the wall is obvious and it projects its harsh geometry into the flat, infinite distance. It can suggest the intractable nature of boundaries and divisions: that the high ground of the liminal space represented by the wall is forever contested by opposing groups, racial, political, etc. It captures the current dilemma in

Guyana, using this one prominent feature of the physical landscape. The irony perhaps is that it is a man-made feature – as are most boundaries – a man-made feature by which men have been controlled and obsessed.

In a sense, of course, it is not accurate to say that the landscape inscribes itself into the writer's or artist's mind or imagination in terms that are either positive or negative: as we saw with Raleigh and the quest for Eldorado, a lot depends on the values and desires already in the mind as it confronts the phenomena of the physical landscape. In any case the landscape itself is not static: I have already discussed the way it can be suddenly transformed by a heavy downpour, for example. The landscape of Guyana is subject to cyclic and seasonal changes, and its different appearances at different times can provoke different attitudes – can result in a different language. These seasonal changes can be seen vividly in the Rupununi savannahs in the south of Guyana, where the dry season presents sparse brown vegetation and easy communications along roads and paths and across the easily fordable, diminished rivers [Image 13]. The rainy season, on the other hand, sees the overflowing of rivers, the flooding of large expanses of land and the formation of seasonal lakes: the colours and texture of the landscape changes, and the process of renewal can suggest possibilities of redemption [Image 14].

Before we leave Carter and the coastal strip altogether, however, it should be pointed out that Carter uses the sea and the seafaring fisherman very effectively **to comment on the past and the quest for the future and the sense of self** [Image 15]. The figure of the fisherman is not romanticized (although the language sometimes makes gestures in this direction) but rather is tainted with the horror of the past and that quality of dream or nightmare that we have been examining. Here is the ending of a poem by Carter called "Till I Collect":

Over the shining mud the moon is blood
falling on ocean at the fence of lights.
My course I set, I give my sail the wind
to navigate the islands of the stars
till I collect my scattered skeleton
till I collect. . . . (54)

The fear of excavating the buried horrors of the past – on land or at sea – haunts the imagination. In the later poem "Our Number," the language becomes more enigmatic, but the figure of the fisherman's wife, counting shrimp on the foreshore, provides an unmistakable link to the familiar imaginative complex where the vast sky and sea exposes and diminishes the value and stature of the human until he/she becomes animal or bird, indistinguishable from the fisherman's catch, and is finally (as in the time of slavery) abstracted to a mere number:

The pins of the slack pin seine
irregular the horizon; the tide
Has gone them bare. A most disturbed
seagull proportions a catch. The fisherman's
wife, another seagull, leans on the sky
counting shrimp.

Surrendering ourselves
we denizen an epoch of abuse
trying to defy with the seagull's
or seawife's similar desperation
the tide that naked skins us.

Shrimp is our number. Is so
we stay. Is a way
of counting born we. (182)

One moves beyond the coastal plain and into the interior via the rivers, and these of course have their spirits and their surprises: in Mittelholzer's My Bones and My Flute (1955), when the terrified party is moving up the river at dusk to the spot to which the spectral music of the flute beckons them, the light on the river plays tricks on them and a floating log turns into something else [Image 16]:

A dark, humped object lay about forty feet – ten points to port approximately – ahead of us. In the moonlight it had the appearance of an old tree trunk embedded below and rearing its jagged mossy stump above the water – in short, the commonest form of *tacooba*.

We watched it in anxious suspicious silence. . . .

Without warning, the *tacooba* moved, heaved up, and began to spread out on the water in a sluggish mist. . . . (155)

This is an ironic reversal of what usually occurs – the monster lurking in the river usually turns out to be a 'tacouba' – a floating log or uprooted tree, or some other natural object – but here the 'tacouba' comes alive and turns into a mist, a foul miasma that represents the demonic forces trying to prevent the characters from reaching their goal.

The 'tacouba' is one of the prime terrors of river boat-men in the interior (along with the sudden transformation of the smooth river into the eddies and white water of a dangerous rapid) and is one of the main reasons for the 'bow-man' – the one who stands at the bow with an enormous paddle to look out for danger and signal to the 'captain,' while trying to pull the bow away from the obstacle with the huge paddle. A good example of the terror kindled by such obstacles in the river is the folk-song "Itanamee," about a dangerous rapid. The boat crew is having a bad time because they know they must soon face the dreaded Itanamee rapid:

The Captain wake, he wake the boat-hand
The boat-hand wake, he wake the bow-man
The bow-man wake with the paddle in he hand:
"Captain, Captain, put me ashore
I don't want to go any more,
Itanamee a frighten me
Itanamee a too much fuh me
Itanamee a hurt me belly
Itanimee, Itanamee. . . ." (Traditional Guyanese Folksong)

Travellers along Guyana's rivers are subject to other strange and mistaken perceptions: it is not always easy to discern the next point around which the river turns in the wall of foliage ahead, nor the entrances to creeks and tributaries, and sometimes the reflecting mirror of the river's surface can cause real disorientation [Image 17]. It becomes difficult to know where the real river bank ends and where its reflection begins. The sky and the foliage reflected in the river are as vivid as those above it. For example, if one inverts the picture, it is not that easy to tell that reality and reflection have changed places [Image 18]. There is a passage in Wilson Harris' Palace of the Peacock (1960), which exploits the confusion caused by this kind of inversion. Here the characters are cutting a path through the forest next to the river, which can be glimpsed through the screen of foliage:

The solid wall of trees was filled with ancient blocks of shadow and

with gleaming hinges of light. Wind rustled the leafy curtains through which masks of living beard dangled as low as the water and the sun. My living eye was stunned by inversions of the brilliancy and gloom of the forest in a deception and hollow and socket. (26)³

The "gleaming hinges of light" are of course reflections of the sun on the river, glimpsed through narrow openings in the wall of undergrowth – hence the phrase "low as the water and the sun." This inversion is heightened by the fact that the forest canopy blocks the sun from above, so that the only light shines brightly from below their feet. So severe is the narrator's disorientation that his imagination soon succumbs to other suggestions in the forest, as he begins to hear footsteps:

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 ambushed cry which was no more than an echo of myself – a breaking and grotesque voice, man and boy, age and youth speaking together. I recovered myself from my dead faint supported by old Schomburgk, on one hand and Caroll, the young Negro boy, on the other. I was speechless and ashamed that they had had to come searching for me, and had found me in such a state [Image 19]. (28)

Reading Wilson Harris, more than any other Guyanese writer, it seems to me, requires an awareness of the relationship between landscape and the language of the imagination, always remembering that for Harris the reality of the landscape – indeed all reality – is partial, in the sense that we can never perceive all of it, but can learn, through the kind of weakness confessed by the character in the passage above, to discern links and connections that open possibilities of reading the landscape (reality) from a perspective of humility and acceptance and love rather than one of conquest or rape or possession. Harris has said in Landscape of Dreams that "much literature that deals with landscape is a one-sided discourse," meaning that the landscape is seldom allowed to respond. Some of the inversions and other oddities of perception we are discussing might be, in some sense, invitations to revise our self-centred attitudes and our relationship to the land.

I want to quote a passage of poetry in which an imagined early explorer, a seeker of Eldorado encouraged by Raleigh's book, sails into one of the rivers of north-western Guyana in the rainy season and is struck by the difference from the rivers of his home and is fulminating about nature's lack of 'discipline' in this new world landscape:

Even the rivers here are too natural,
wild and undisciplined – this meanders
like a drunken scullion pissing down an alley,
splashing itself all over the landscape,
innocent of the need for human engineering
to restrain its boisterousness with dam and levee;
it should be pulled tight like a halyard through
a straight canal or two of uniform and navigable depth,
it's ragged seaward end neatly spliced with harbour walls
to give it shape and definition and purpose, most of all.
The things of nature, the master thought, should

³All subsequent references to Palace are from this edition.

be made manageable, like nature in his own far land:
 where rivers do not change their channel with each tide,
 and forested isles do not float on two fathoms
 of water to beguile the senses and confuse the brain;
 where is no drunken prodigality of rain. . . .
 This may well be the first real vessel this river
 has ever seen, and it should show more respect:
 it is the God-given authority of a mighty queen
 that sent and keeps it here – not mindless nature,
 sprawled like a harlot, beckoning and infecting all,
 confounding all attempt at lawful measurement. . . .⁴

There is no dialogue here, nor surrender to the possibility of an alternative way of imagining the landscape; only the selfish insistence on reading the world's text according to the rules and habits of narrow personal and national experience.

Waterfalls frequently present the appearance of stairs to be climbed by the traveller and this image of ascent is important because it can suggest the attainment of not just physical, but also spiritual and even moral 'higher ground' [Image 20]. It is no wonder therefore, that the interior of Guyana breeds notions not only of fabulous riches, but also of creating the perfect society or earthly paradise. Several authors have located, within the isolated and difficult landscape of the Guyana region, fictional Utopias, most of which fail in the end. I am thinking here of W. H. Hudson's Green Mansions (1904), set in the Venezuela/Guyana borderlands, in which the protagonist finds the perfect mate, Rima, the ethereal spirit-woman of the forest who converses with the forest-creatures in a bird-like language and with whom he prepares to journey to the perfect place, Riolama – except that she is killed by the brutish Indians who consider her the daughter of the Dai-Dai or evil spirit of the mountains. In Alejo Carpentier's The Lost Steps (1953), the protagonist, originally seeking primitive musical instruments (a variation on the quest for gold) seems to find an earthly paradise in the shadow of what he calls the 'great plateaux' of the region, but he loses it all when, like Orpheus or like Lot's wife he 'looks back' – returns to New York to settle his affairs. Upon his return to the area he is unable to find the settlement and leaves in bitter disappointment – confirming that the only paradise is the paradise that is lost. Mittelholzer's utopia is an old Dutch plantation up the Berbice river in Shadows Move Among Them (1951), where the Reverend Harmston founds a community of Amerindians and families from the coast where there is education, arts and culture for everyone – and free sex – but it is undermined and eventually founders because of its intolerance and the infliction of the death penalty on undesirables who will not obey the rules.

There were also real attempts at utopia: Wilson Harris suggests in his novel Jonestown (1996) that the real Jonestown was an attempt to realize a Utopian dream in the Guyana interior, and points out that it was not the first such gathering of people devoted to a man and an idea to come to fatal grief in that setting. Richard Schomburgk, in his book Travels in Guyana 1840-1844 (published in 1922), and Michael Swan in The Marches of Eldorado (1958), both tell the story of an Amerindian chieftain called Awakaipu, who, in the middle of the nineteenth century, lured a large gathering of fellow Amerindians to his settlement at the base

⁴Mark McWatt, from "Mercator" (unpublished poem).

of Mt. Kukuanaam with promises of immortality and powers akin to those of the Europeans. The utopia ended in the slaughter of more than four hundred Indians who were expected to return from the dead and to descend with new bodies from the top of the mountain. They would have white skins and the promised powers of the Europeans. When nothing happened after two weeks, the remaining Indians killed Awakaipu and dispersed into the forest. A. J. Seymour's long poem "Amalivaca" is another account of an Amerindian Utopia that fails. In this one, all the broken and rapid-strewn rivers were made smooth and all the crooked paths of the world straightened by the god Amalivaca who descended to help his people (69-77).

The point of all these examples is to suggest that imagining Utopia, like imagining Eldorado, is somehow prompted by aspects of the landscape itself, as they interact with the curious and inquiring human mind. In this way Utopia and Eldorado become features of the imagination. It is hard to look at Kaiteur Falls and not wonder what lies in the cave behind the curtain of falling water: such dramatic features ought to have a purpose or reason or explanation beyond the fortuity of nature or geology [Image 21]. An American entomologist, Paul Zahl, wrote a book (To The Lost World, 1939) about an expedition to Guyana to collect specimens of *dinopodera*, the largest known ant, but in his writing he is frequently distracted by Utopian imaginings about life in that landscape [Image 22]. He admires the life in the Amerindian villages, free from

this nonsense of wearing clothes in an equatorial belt, this nonsense of having only one wife, this nonsense of not hunting on the seventh day. . . . (133)

This sounds a lot like Mittelholzer. At one point he is joined in his wanderings by and Englishman, G. T. Chislett, and they come across a dramatic waterfall on the Utshi river and Chislett's first words are: "Looks like good diamond geology down there, doesn't it?" [Image 23].

The mind's difficulty with Utopias is avoiding the inevitable failure and disappointment. Perhaps Wilson Harris overcomes this best by having his crew in Palace of the Peacock realize at the end that it is not the landscape that is concealing from them the object of their quest, but rather their own failure of imagination: once they are forced, at the end of their purgatorial journey, to focus on aspects other than material goals and the physical surfaces of the world around them, they discover that the landscape, as in Hopkins, becomes numinous and charged with a spiritual grandeur that prompts them towards harmony, community, compassion. This happens in the novel as they ascend the waterfall and have visions, through windows in the rock face, that suggest their own salvation and the redemption of the world [Image 24]. But the utopian harmony glimpsed briefly at the end of the novel remains, as it should, a mystery or dream. It is the dream that motivates the protagonists of most of Harris's novels, but it is the journey, the difficult ascent through the wild and uncompromising landscape that is the narrative, the poem, the thing worth telling.

A final word about the waterfall: its impact on the imagination might depend on how one approaches it. Seen in its entirety from a far distance, it is simply a visual spectacle, but from close up it depends upon whether you approach the top or the base of the fall [Image 25]. The top of the fall can suggest sudden catastrophe as you might be swept over the lip. The perception of this danger at the top of the waterfall can reinforce in the creative imagination the myth of fall, even a fall from

grace, as in A. J. Seymour's "The Legend of Kaitour," where the God Makonaima allows his Patamona people to be defeated by the fierce, invading Caribs because of their sins and they have to atone by having their leader Kaie go over the lip of the fall in a sacrificial canoe [Image 26]. The vision and the descent from the top of the fall can therefore be a *thanatos* vision or movement – a vision of death.

On the other hand, if one approached the fall from the bottom, as members of the crew do in Palace of the Peacock, then the climb up to the lip might be dangerous, but it is more of a Promethean movement or vision, struggling out of an underworld of material entanglement towards a spiritual vision (this is why their material selves – bodies – along with the 'real' world, disappear before they reach the top). In the ascent, Harris's imagery assumes a sacramental character, as the curtain of falling water becomes a "bridal veil" [Image 27]. Donne's confused thinking is clarified and achieves an extraordinary focus:

A singular thought always secured him to the scaffolding. It was the unflinching clarity with which he looked into himself and saw that all his life he had loved no-one but himself. He focussed his blind eye with all penitent might on this pinpoint star and reflection as one looking into the void of one's self upon the far greater love and self-protection that have made the universe [Image 28]. (140)

The language of the imagination inspired by the Guyana landscape still tends towards the wish-fulfilment of the dream of Eldorado, but the dream itself can be altered and transformed, as we see with Harris here, so that it no longer reflects the anxieties of an age that tend to linger in the lore and literature associated with this part of the world, but can be expressed as a dream of transcendence and human regeneration – the kind of dream of which Guyana seems to be in dire need at the moment [Image 29].

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