

The Magic Remains

On the Work of Terry Wilson and his Book *Perilous Passage*

by Ian MacFadyen

*"He finds a comrade,
Now he beats the drum, now he stops,
Now he sobs, now he sings."*

- I Ching

now you see him, now you don't

In *Perilous Passage*, Terry Wilson recalls his years as "assistant-apprentice" to the "stricken mage" whom he calls Bedaya. Bedaya is a past master of disguise and fabulation, magic and mischief, a "man whose Intelligence background had taught him how to switch identity and rub out personal history" to the point where "nobody knew who he was anymore". *Now you see him, now you don't* - who was that mysterious "Man from Nowhere"? None may say. Except, well, Bedaya is . . . *Brion Gysin* - isn't he? *Wasn't he?* Brion Gysin, the artist and writer and shaman, whose reputation went before him and has continued to grow since his death . . . Painter of space-time, inventor of the cut-up technique, esoteric traveller, raconteur *sans pareil* . . . The legendary Brion Gysin, the Most Famous Unknown Artist in the World, the Great Mythomaniac and expert on supernatural genealogies, the visionary shape-shifter of the human form, who now escapes his own fantastic biography. Contradiction was his method and the advocate of total plenitude and utter dissolution is now entirely discorporate and will live forever.

a true creation

But we'd better remember in case we forget - Bedaya is a *recreation in other words* of that extraordinary man who really did exist, once upon a time, so to speak. Bedaya is Gysin transmuted through

Wilson's memory and his art, he is a character and like all characters subject to all the usual omissions and additions, factual gaps and fictional fissures. He is a true creation, then. And a biographical fiction. *As in art, so in life*. He is Bedaya/Gysin in perpetual, unstable symbiosis. Which is as it should be since who was that *original* 'Brion Gysin' in any case? Someone who agreed with Rimbaud: "Je est un autre." He was *not-Gysin*, he was the unnamed *other*, the phantasmatic self-created who observed of his own apparently fixed biological and legal incarnation : "Send me back . . . Wrong time, wrong place, wrong color!"

all truth is a story

Gysin was a consummate, charismatic performer, and Bedaya is a role which *could have been written for him* . . . as indeed it now has been (the late great actor returns to the boards for one last farewell performance). Dedicating *Perilous Passage* to his mentor, Wilson siamese-twins the great actor and the part he now plays: "FOR BRION, Brahim John C.B.L. Gysin von-You-don't-know-who - Massa Bedaya." And *Perilous Passage* literally *plays out* the memoir mode and re-stages supposed real-life drama as a stellar *performance* (the only kind that really makes it). That masked man, that master of illusion - an expert at rubbing out the word and permutating his own name into silence - would have understood perfectly. "*Nothing is true, everything is permitted.*" These talismanic words - Hassan i Sabbah's razor, Gysin's *cri de coeur* - echo down the years and rise up again from the pages of Wilson's book in which he asks himself, "Was that a memory or a fiction I concocted?" *Mektoub*: it is well and truly *written*. As Gysin wrote in his novel *The Process*, "All truth is a story I am telling about myself." And Wilson likewise has spoken of "the truth which transcends mere fact . . ."

seeing but not seen

Gysin-as-Bedaya is the tutelary spirit of *Perilous Passage*, the departed magus who still presides over this world of *maya*, the realm of illusion. He is The Almost Invisible Man, "poised in space, a disembodied eye, invisible, incorporeal, seeing but not seen". But

that Man from Nowhere is paradoxically *everywhere* and his spirit radiates throughout the book. Gysin wrote at the end of his novel *The Last Museum*, "I mean to get out of here and come back again never! . . . There is no one I ever knew in this world I want to see again." But *Perilous Passage* is full of signs and portents, cryptic messages and mysterious happenings which testify to the mage's continuing power, his spirit defying the 'immutable' laws of space and time. He survives not only in his art but in his magic and *Perilous Passage* is about how that magic was passed on and carried into the future. "A distant time, young man typing. In his room he remembers the perilous passage." The book which the initiate is writing will incarnate the magical techniques which he has learned from a great master.

labyrinthine circuits

Wilson too has his soubriquet, his pseudonym or alias - 'Whelme', the moniker he assumed in his previous auto-fictions. Bedaya/Gysin leaves Whelme/Wilson a magical legacy, the Third Mind project, but there's a malign conspiracy brewing and hazardous times lie ahead. In Paris and London, Tangier and Lima, in bars and apartments and trains, from elegant boulevards to the depths of the rain forest, he must travel through the labyrinthine circuits of the cryptocracy - sinister encounters and deadly intrigues await him, and his so-called 'allies' are all "devious, unreliable, or plain bone stupid." It is a picaresque story of trust and betrayal, a cautionary tale about the uses and abuses of power, a paranoid espionage thriller. Bedaya may indeed, as Wilson says, have "outmanoeuvred himself" so that fabrication and disguise rebound upon him and his followers. As Degas remarked, "The artist plans his work like a criminal plotting a crime", and forbidden acts of transgression obliterate the distinction between the libertarian and the con man, the genius and the pariah. There is something appropriate in the ranks of crooks and charlatans swarming to Bedaya's deathbed: artists by any other name. Wilson must master spiritual strategies and counter-terror tactics as he attempts to realize Bedaya's "alternative version of the history and manipulation of power". Phony magicians and

phantom intelligence agents, “predatory hustlers” and “bloodsuckers” move in on Gysin/Bedaya’s flat in rue St. Martin. Mr Green, from the same lineage and bespoke tailors as Ivor Powell and Gerald Hamilton - agents and double agents of the Old School - decides to take Wilson under his wing and teach him a few lessons in genteel misanthropy. Mr Green, a class act, “straight off the set of Casablanca”, laments all the “dummies” and “fodder” he is obliged to exploit and Wilson finds himself - or rather, loses himself - in “the land of hunters and the hunted” where the prey must be kept “Entrapped. Earthbound.”

trapped in time

There are “corrupt, corruptible” creatures everywhere Wilson turns, and these ventriloquists want to keep their human dummies trapped in ignorance, trapped in time - Thou Shalt Not Be Aware. This is one of the key themes of *Perilous Passage* : the struggle to escape from the prison house of time, from the mortal confines of the life sentence. “Welcome wealthy Time, that which ends.” The quest is for release from cause-and-effect linear time, fixed identity and the doomed body. Wilson quotes from the liberational thinker Charles Fort, one of the inspirational sources of *Perilous Passage*:

“. . . like a purgatory, all that is commonly called existence . . . is quasi-existence, neither real nor unreal, but expression of attempt to become real, or to generate for or recruit a real existence.” Wilson tries to “recruit a real existence”, searching for a way *out* of accepted notions of human consciousness, the state of being stuck *here* and nowhere else, in the body, in time. *Perilous Passage* is an attempt to escape from both a conspiracy determined to expunge Bedaya’s esoteric heritage and from those deeply implanted conceptual limitations which fix us here - and nowhere else - in quotidian time. The two themes are, of course, inextricably connected: it is precisely the function of the ‘vested interests’ to nullify Bedaya’s techniques for transcending *la condition humaine*.

visionary quest

Like Gysin and Burroughs, Wilson’s primary concern is not to repeat this metaphysical conundrum ad nauseam, but to employ

particular methods and techniques so as to actually transcend “the human form” and experience what Michel Foucault called “limit-experiences” - states of “voluntary obliteration”, “amorphous fluidity” and “continual becoming”, from which one emerges re-created, even self-created. This is the “visionary quest”, the “actual sacrifice of life” which *Perilous Passage* charts, and again, to use Foucault’s terminology, the “phantasm events” experienced in psychedelic consciousness are “spiraloid and reverberating”. The book is full of psychic disturbance - fault lines open up in consciousness and the perceived three-dimensional world cracks and shudders and collapses: “The whole building starts to explode along with home somewhere around here.” The text of *Perilous Passage* testifies to the upheavals and dislocations of consciousness - there are paroxysms and seizures of language, the words on the page coagulate and fragment and disperse.

the demonic incarnate

Attempting to escape his purgatorial existence, Wilson is “subject to threats and support from all manner of interested parties” and this culminates in a “concerted psychic attack.” He has to somehow find “the strength to survive this initiation” and he is both helped and hindered in this by the “colourful international fabulist” known as KJ who is both a deranged megalomaniacal brother of AJ from Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* and a perfect likeness of one James Kennedy McCann - “international playboy from the mean streets of Belfast”, a rogue genius, a mover and maker, a real world shaker, electric with rebellion, the demonic incarnate. This KJ character is the Fool companion to Bedaya’s Magus, and he embodies the duplicitous, volatile, amoral nature of the divine practical joker, the mercurial Trickster, the King for a Day, the Lord of Misrule “demolishing everything in his path”. It is his astonishing spirit of anarchy which helps Wilson get through his Season In Hell, even though KJ, like Bedaya, is a master at putting absolutely everyone through the wringer when it suits him. He is a saboteur of conventional realities, stage manager of an alternative Pandemonium Shadow Show - he blows the world’s cover story.

spiritual destruction

Perilous Passage pays homage to Gysin and Burroughs' Third Mind project, although for Wilson the enterprise is necessarily accompanied by regret and melancholy. "It was almost closing time for Magical Morocco. Electronic mind control was moving in and the Djnoun forces would soon be in full retreat gems to be snapped up before they disappeared forever." So, too, the amusingly named 'Friends of Bedaya' want to dump The Third Mind: "The whole concept of The Third Mind was seen as unpredictable, unnecessary, and, most particularly, unprofitable . . ." It isn't only the attempted nullification of Gysin's "incredible discoveries in psychic exploration" which appalls Wilson, but the planetary destruction which is also our spiritual destruction - entire cultures burned down to the ground and the precious human spirit sold off everywhere at bargain prices. Again and again he returns to the conspiracy which tried to wipe out Bedaya and himself - even at the risk of appearing foolish, jealous, paranoid, the accused author and willing victim of this shabby scenario - and describes the "big power battle to neutralize and assimilate a lifetime of psychic power into three-dimensional financial manipulative areas . . . assimilate, destruct." When, in their book *Here To Go*, Gysin laments the irreversible eradication of "the unspoken and invisible" worlds of the spirit, Wilson replies: "It seems to me that breaking away, dispersing illusion and delusion, is a sort of destructive act . . . as if somewhere deep inside man really can't wait to get through with this planet, this level of existence . . ." In *Perilous Passage* there are profitable toxic organophosphate scams and livestock reanimation processes which poison the food chain and create a host of diseases and runaway viruses - to be attributed, naturally, to encephalomyelitis, ME, MS, and AIDS, you *name* it . . . Cover up. Deny. *At all costs.*

selling the gold

Gysin's 'Bad Animal' tirade in *Here To Go*, in which he castigates human beings for their "crimes against nature" - despoiling, polluting, killing, burning down the future, scorning magic and filling the world with trash - haunts the pages of *Perilous Passage*. Gysin's words are lacerating and splenetic, a bravura howl of psychic anguish and visceral horror - he did indeed give Wilson "a

dangerous world to live in", that is, recognition of the true terror of being alive. Wilson recognized the vertiginous power of Burroughs' work when he told me, "Jeff Nuttall in *Bomb Culture*, he says something absolutely crucial . . . that once you started to think about what Burroughs was saying, *the ground opened up beneath your feet . . .* " *Perilous Passage* is a work in this lineage - it confronts the very worst in man, it opens up the hidden terrors of our psychic condition. Certainly, there are plenty of Bad Animals in *Perilous Passage*, cynical and mercenary exemplars of what Gysin called "this disgusting history . . . of treason, and double dealing, and . . . shit." These *characters* want to swop the magic for the gold, then *sell the gold . . .* and burn down the psyche in the process. As Wilson put it to me, in similar vein, "I remember Brion saying, 'Can the Great God Pan defeat Alan Klein? I fear not.' A predatory rock manager is more powerful in the end - A Solid Eternity operator makes it stick with their electric lights to drive the spirit away - Last hangouts devastated - Pharmaceutical Corps razing the Amazon for their noxious problems - Synthesize Coca and get great benefits to humans like *crack cocaine . . .* " Despite this program of doom, *Perilous Passage* suggests that the Third Mind has not been entirely relegated to the archives, it is "an experiment which failed, but which is still going on" - hidden in the margins, overlooked or scorned, but still kept alive by a few determined collaborators. Somehow, against the odds, the spirit survives, the magic remains.

a new biological film

Against the wholesale liquidation of the worlds of illusion, Wilson engages The Third Mind, a process of creative collaboration: one plus one equals three, two minds meet to make a third, two separate egos dissolve in psychic symbiosis. Crucially, conventional notions of autonomous identity and individuality are thrown into question by The Third Mind - it's the systematic disorientation of the senses, methodical detachment from the human model and all rational constraints, the shutting down of the inner dialogue. It advocates telepathic communication and out-of-the-body experiences, and infinite interior visions triggered by flickering light and electrical oscillations at the alpha frequency. Third Mind artworks are decomodified, desynchronized and dematerialized in a process of dynamic dispersal which sunders all categories and limits - words

gush and spurt autonomously, permutating and erasing themselves on tape, liberated from human intentionality, while calligraphic dreams and painted hallucinations are projected on the interior mind screen creating a new "Biological Film".

Another definition of dissolution is "termination of life, that is, death" and despite its verbal dynamics The Third Mind may lead straight to a terminal disappearing act: after all, its professed intentions are *to cut-up, to rub out, to go*. Certainly it is a risky psychic process, and like Georges Bataille's concepts of 'headlessness' and the '*informe*', its emphasis on the fluid, the immaterial, the impersonal and the transcendent risks the fatal loss of the ego and rational consciousness . . . life itself? Gysin made a typically laconic comment about the early days of his experiments with Burroughs: "It was often downright scary but all a barrel of fun at the same time."

the dismantling process

There is a mystical dimension to the scary fun of The Third Mind and the techniques Wilson employs cannot be separated from his spiritual quest, just as Gysin's approach to his art was intimately related to his knowledge of Sufi practices, of the kind described by Pir Vilyat Inayat Khan: "*The dismantling process*: consciousness disconnected from its physical and mental support. There is no vestige of embodiment, in fact *a feeling of estrangement from the earth*, of spacelessness and timelessness, ego consciousness slipping away . . . One envisions oneself as a *process* instead of an entity. Dare you to be in the world and not of the world? A need for that cold remote emotionless *beyond* . . ." Gysin's permutations for oral recitation resemble in form the 'WAZIFA' mystical cyclical chants of the Sufis, but the content of Gysin's anti-texts is also significant in regard to Sufism: 'Rub Out The Word', 'Kick That Habit Man'. The Third Mind is a *de-programming process* and *Perilous Passage* is above all an attempt to do just that, it is *writing to some purpose, extra-literary* - a critique of consciousness, a transcendent endeavour.

magical product

The results of Third Mind experimental techniques can disappear into thin air right before your eyes, swallowed up by the very processes which created them. Wilson understands the need to salvage something from these temperamental, transient phenomena. Paradoxically, the *dismantling* procedures of The Third Mind must produce *actual results* or the whole thing remains stuck at the level of theory. Wilson: "The manipulation of the tape machine and the cut-ups are hands-on procedures, the Word as material like paint for a painter, though I don't think there's a way of understanding this totally, rather we can talk about the actual effects of certain procedures and utilize them." At the same time the techniques are employed primarily to change consciousness and perception, and it is the *psychic effects* which are paramount.

Wilson writes that "Bedaya wasn't fooling around, talking about this marvellous thing forever. It was necessary to produce some actual physical product." This physical 'product' is a necessary step towards the creation of a *magical* 'product' as the term was used by Albertus Magnus in his *Metaphysics*: "The quantity obtained by multiplying two or more quantities together." It is the '*liqueur d'or*', the '*aurum potabile*' which Rimbaud pursued through his Season In Hell - that is, transformation of the 'self', realization of the desire to become an *other*.

essentially split

The Third Mind techniques don't work on command or at the touch of a button, and sometimes they won't get you anywhere at all. Wilson explained: "As Brion said, some of these techniques like mirror gazing are very *hot* one moment for some reason, a lot of people turn onto it and it really works . . . and then the whole area just shuts off completely, just like that. . . A current sweeps in from some non-dominant source and for awhile it's totally happening, then it's quite suddenly switched off - nothing for it but to pack up and go some place else. . ." Significantly, Third Mind techniques are seen as temperamental, fluid and amorphous, resistant to human

will and control, they have *a life of their own*. At the same time the procedures are material, mechanical, systematic, operating autonomously outside the human mind and body. The Third Mind practitioner is essentially *split* : both a material 'operator' who is part of the machinery of production and a disconnected 'observer' who picks up on the results, which are then utilized. This split may be seen as paradigmatic of Wilson as character and author respectively - the operator who submits to the material exigencies of his fate (including great misfortune, the very worst of times) and gives himself up to the dismantling process, and the divinator who discovers startling new connections and combinations in the *written material* which is produced - *alternative versions* which transform the meaning of experience and dispute and even annul it. As with the work of Burroughs and Gysin, it is impossible not to see this paradoxical 'disconnected engagement' as in some ways a willed dispassionate removal of the suffering self, an escape from an excoriated identity . . . *Re-move. Re-make. Re-model.*

willed exorcism

The Third Mind is a Pandora's Box of magical operations and as Gysin told Wilson, "Spells are made to *work*, not to rest on the level of verbal dexterity and so-called 'technique'." *Perilous Passage* is neither a retrospective account nor a work of literature - rather it's an attempt *to cast spells, to make things happen*, to write in order to discover rather than to explain. It is also, at some level, a *willed exorcism*. Crucially, although Third Mind techniques are to be applied literally and materially, the fortuitous and unruly results which they give rise to are experienced as *magical* - and it is possible to treat the techniques, literally and metaphorically, as formulas and invocations for both the calling forth and expulsion of evil spirits. For example, the 'voice inside', the persistent, intrusive, muttering, critical voices of inner dialogue and possession - they aren't 'like' tape recordings, rather they most definitely *are* recordings, *original traces* deep in the psyche . . . So make those voices speak out loud and record them on tape and then physically play them back - chop them up, mix them up, and *erase them*. The Third Mind makes the demonic ghost in the machine manifest so as to ritually abolish it - hence Gysin's description of the cut-up technique as "Machine Age

knife-magic." Similarly, in *Perilous Passage*, those *real characters* with their well-rehearsed cover stories and endless routines, their interminable, incorrigible *babble* - it feels like Wilson had to put them out there, get them down on paper and *exorcise them*. As David Darby has written : "Wilson has described Cut Up as a form of 'exorcism'. A narrative illusion is broken and the end result is intended as an act of *magic* . . ." The conjured characters are *dispelled* . . . "These our actors / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air . . ."

palimpsest

Perilous Passage not only *describes* Third Mind techniques - it is actually *produced by them*. Wilson's writing employs transcribed audio hallucinations and notes apparently made *in situ*, found texts, cut-ups, permutations, and collaged material in the creation of a palimpsest - what has been erased from the page will *show through*, the hidden connections will *appear in time*. . . *Perilous Passage* is *prophetic history*. Like Gysin and Burroughs, Wilson treats language itself as a parasitic invader which must be resisted, broken up and reassembled, and visually his text bears all the marks of erasure and fracture - an approach required by the extreme nature of the experiences conveyed: the delirium induced by certain drugs, the fluid transformations and vertigo of dreams, psychic manifestations and visionary experiences. He captures something of these disorientations and psychic seizures through abrupt shifts and detours, utilizing ellipsis and parataxis, the cutting off and disconnecting of sentences and phrases so that thought trails off or is interrupted, leaving words suspended, floating on the page in space, signifying the ideal silence which lies beyond those words, beyond the Great Word Happening.

retrocognition

Wilson also employs quotationary reference, allowing his own and Bedaya's past words to find new places in the text - a process of *retrocognition* which picks up on the echoes between key phrases (seemingly plucked out of the aether) and the events described.

Indeed, some of these magical, *loaded* phrases appear to have been planted by Gysin/Bedaya as triggers to make things happen - magical arrangements of words which possess a haunting power, a sinister influence. "*No more extra time.*" Wilson has pursued the *deja vu* potential of the cut-up technique since the 1960s, tracking those seemingly inscrutable chance phrases which strike consciousness at certain moments and later prove to be prophetic - precognitive messages from the future, with a mysterious, talismanic personal significance. This is something more than a technique - it is, rather, a revelatory system of linguistic divination. This recombinatory process reverberates throughout *Perilous Passage* - the single time track of conventional linear narrative and the multiple narrative strands of the so-called 'modern' novel are derailed by the cut-up which creates simultaneity and endless referentiality in a multi-dimensional space. The writing of memory becomes endless possibility infinitely deferred.

between the cut and the paste

Wilson writes of "A dream I am living to the end" - or should that be a nightmare without end? *Perilous Passage* describes years of both "victory and devastation" - and there is a high price to be paid. Wilson's attempts to control events only add to the endemic confusion and panic of his situation, but when he relinquishes control and refuses to play the power game any longer, this only makes things worse. It's a no-win situation where maybe amnesia is the best bet - "I remember little or nothing." Perhaps this is classic repression - shut down all areas with access to those painful, appalling times . . . The book questions the efficacy of memory as well as the value of human will in the face of both apparently fortuitous events and covert operations. How to live this life, how to desire anything, never mind recruit another more 'real' existence, when one is apparently at the mercy of fate or the powers-that-be? Here the 'author' is not only *not* in possession of the 'facts', but refuses to paper over the cracks - instead, he accepts the provisional and indeterminate and contingent nature of his writing, courting hazard and coincidence, opening the story *out* rather than condensing and streamlining it, as if the true design of events is revealed by pulling loose the threads and unravelling the established pattern. "I seem to remember it, maybe I do", "just an

average memory", "I remember little or nothing", "it's hard to write such things as occurred", "I have somehow neglected to record", "then my head really spinning and I don't remember", "the difficulty will always be to remember", "everything is hard to remember" . . . Wilson emphasizes the discontinuity and incompleteness of human recall, what Robert Louis Stevenson called "a grand memory for forgetting". Between the cut and the paste there is always the possibility of permanent erasure.

against the grain

Retrocognition opens up unexpected vistas, but there are many instances in *Perilous Passage* where language *falls short* - and the writer admits the inadequacy and the redundancy of language, courting his own obsolescence as 'writer'. After all, *The Third Mind* is intended to project the subject *beyond language*, to take him into areas where the 'voice inside', the linguistic jabber of consciousness, is silenced, to a place where language no longer has to *have its say*, always demanding, ironically, *the last word*. In this sense, *Perilous Passage* is writing *against the grain*. How to describe experiences aimed at "rubbing out the word"? How to kick the 'language habit' through *writing*? Contradiction remains the method: abolish and create, discover and erase, permute and fix, record and invent. Inspired by the techniques pioneered by Gysin and Burroughs, Wilson's voice is nevertheless unmistakably his own and *Perilous Passage* is literally *his story* - it is the literal fiction of his own life which he discovers through the twists and turns of a tale which is telling itself, the pieces falling where they may to create unforeseen connections and unsuspected pictures. Because his mentors were Gysin and Burroughs it is perhaps inevitable that critics will treat Wilson's work as merely derivative of their ideas and achievements, but he has followed his own path whilst having the courage to apply what he has learned from their work. Imagine a scientist disregarding the discovery of DNA or the Theory of Relativity because that would compromise his claims to 'originality'.

Crucially, *Perilous Passage* is the expression of Wilson's own dilemma of spiritual alienation - a long night of the soul which he has *lived through*. His has been a singular life, a life like nobody

else's, and *Perilous Passage* is special and unique. His writing is more than a performance on the page - "Having had your dream, *be it.*" Wilson was very clear about this when I spoke to him about *The Third Mind*: "To actually engage with that process and see where it takes you, rather than sitting around and endlessly theorizing and speculating about it - you have to just do it and *see what happens . . .*"

overheated projector

Gaps continually appear in the fabric of so-called 'reality' (the only word, according to Nabokov, which should *always* be placed in inverted commas). In *Perilous Passage* these gaps resemble the projection of a film where image and soundtrack are out of synch, the film speeding up and then slowing right down, a second film superimposed and a completely different soundtrack fading in and out. The analogy with film is perhaps inevitable when dealing with a work which cuts up and re-splices narrative scenes, in which sequences are staged and 're-shot' - this 'footage' seems to burn up in an overheated projector. Disembodied voices intone cryptic messages from the aether, conversations are scrambled on faulty phone lines, audio distortion blasts words across the page or they fade in and out as if on an old crystal set, there is a continual bombardment of babble and noise, "an insane mix of rhythm and melody, ranting voices car alarms police sirens dogfights and pneumatic drills . . ." The visual images in the book are beautiful and loaded with menace - a radiant hovering star, flickering candle flames, brilliant flashes of colour and light, langorous dream states, an arch of roses, dazzling landscapes, a blaze of colour lighting up a wall, a great white flash, dancing patterns, everything swirling and hazy, a "blood-red planet, a burning world spinning in space", flying flowers, a hall of mirrors, a vertiginous landing strip . . . Wilson/Whelme melts and warps like a psychedelic mylar photograph by Ira Cohen: "The mirror has a tendency to go into convulsions when I look at it."

kaleidoscope

The sheer turbulence and disorientation of disrupted perceptions - consciousness and events out of synch, the interior and outer worlds split - is given in a way which is startling and unique. This isn't stream-of-consciousness, it's stuttering, echoing, *broken* consciousness, the pieces of the puzzle shifting perpetually. Like a kaleidoscope, every reading of the book shakes and scatters the brightly illuminated pieces. The book is unstable, impossible to grasp - it defies the reader's desire for completion, for the text as artefact with a comprehensible structure. It is, to use Burroughs' phrase, an "exploded mosaic" which continually remakes itself only to dissolve and disintegrate. *Perilous Passage* pays homage to Korzybski's exposure of linguistic credulity, Charles Fort's critique of scientific absolutism, and to shamanic shape-shifting and alternate states of consciousness - it is a work of linguistic deconstruction and conceptual liberation, a work of sorcery and conjuration, like one of those grimoires where the words on the page were reputed to rearrange themselves whenever the book was shut. *Open sesame* : "This is the past between mosaics."

alien history

The book incarnates Wilson's experience of the fluidity of identity "The person I no longer was had died with Bedaya." In limbo, he hangs onto that sloughed-off identity for a year "in a condition of near-total pain. It was now no longer possible." He must become an *other* in order to find 'himself' and crucial to this process is to see the past in a different way, even to accept that 'his' past is someone else's : "But these are all memories . . . Remembered in a framework of ordinary human time . . . There are other memories which don't fit into that framework . . . of another time." We believe that we *are* our memories - so who are we when we *remember for the first time*, when memory becomes *discovery*? The trauma of dissociated memories, their linkages broken, appearing like a cut-up video of someone else's dreams - Wilson's writing strikingly evokes this alien history, this *other life* . Strangely familiar characters appear in *Perilous Passage* - they're drawn from the days of Kipling and the Great Game, from "a 1940s haunted house movie", from *Cold Comfort Farm* and *The 39 Steps* and *An Inspector Calls* . . . Their performances are absolutely professional but they're also completely out of time, the acting style dated, the footage scratched,

the sets creaky. It's as if these madcap characters have forgotten that they belong back in some Gothic melodrama, a black and white B-movie, a Boy's Adventure Story, they're unaware that they are actors playing out their allotted roles, doomed to helplessly act out existing stereotypes. In fact, they become the characters they are playing, until they *are* those characters, and that is *all* they are - impersonations of 'themselves'. Behind Wilson's exuberant satire lies a critique of quasi-human existence, the purgatorial theatre of life where the human is taught the social necessity of *acting according to type* - that artificial world of disguise and self-interest, fear and loneliness, where job, status, class, wealth and image are all that count. When Wilson writes of "recruiting a real existence" he doesn't mean learning his lines in some Green Room and *playing his part* for the rest of his life. He wants out of all that - definitively.

some nebulous mental construct

Wilson explained to me: "Perilous Passage is reportage, as close as I could make it, as close as I could get it to the experience concerned, experiences of course which I was *remembering*, or *trying* to remember . . . But it's not the writing of a journalist . . . Don Juan Tuesta, a well-known Central American practitioner, describes sorcery in general as 'a deceit in the service of truth' and in that sense, all my books are 'a deceit in the service of truth' and, hopefully, they transcend 'mere fact' Everyone keeps asking, 'Did this *really happen?*', like they'd be more comfortable if they were told, 'Absolutely, it definitely *happened.*' But what do they mean by 'this'? What's their definition of an event? What do they think writing *is* in relation to whatever it is they're imagining *happened* . . . In 'the past', whatever *that* might be. . . Always invoking some nebulous mental construct like 'the past' and *believing* in it . . . "

the timeless garden

Wilson's previous book, *'D' Train*, explored the area of split identity and time travel through the relationship of the narrator and his *Ka*, his psychic double. In *Perilous Passage* it is made explicit that the object of this "magical dilemma", the merging of Whelme and

Vogue, was to contact Bedaya, to follow the departed magus to the Land of the Dead: "The *Ka* gets into three-dimensional reality by means of a physical body. The body gets back via the medium of dreams. They are divided and need each other. Bedaya has been drawing me back into the area of my parallel body, now the only area in which he could be directly, consciously contacted. The only way to reach him is to follow him there. An extremely perilous procedure." It is a procedure designed to create "a completely different time than present alone, no past=present=future . . . there is no past and there is no future

. . . " In '*D*' *Train*, Whelme confronts Vogue, "his missing parallel being" in a "Garden of magical time", a place where time is suspended - "They would forget their time to experience another"-liberated from "Limited Time with its concomitant concept of death." This is a version of the Paradise Garden of Hassan i Sabbah, Old Man of the Mountain, where the *hashisins* took a little taste of immortality . . . and it is an indeterminate state between life and death, death and rebirth, a Bardo in which Whelme and Vogue are no longer "separate egos trapped in human time". Wilson/Whelme and his companion Vogue return to this Magic Garden in *Perilous Passage* - which here takes the form of the jungle of Iquitos, the literally timeless, transcendent place where they undergo *ayahuasca* initiation. This is another version of 'Green Base', a place which Wilson has always deamed of, and a place where truly astonishing visions await him.

recapitulation

Wilson admits that "I simply did not remember Brion in the usual sense. To do so - to *really* remember him - requires an enormous effort of recapitulation because what he taught was not accessible to ordinary consciousness. The only way to reach him is to follow him there." 'Recapitulation' is the crucial word - it is defined as a summing up or a brief account, as well as the repetition of evolutionary stages of growth, but most significantly in the present context there is a rare and telling usage: "a second capitulation or surrender". It is in this sense that *Perilous Passage* is a work of recapitulation, recalling the surrender of the ego to psychic forces following Bedaya's death and culminating in a *second surrender* - to the drug *ayahuasca*, known as 'the drug of recapitulation', during

Wilson's trip to Iquitos in Peru. His account of this trip forms the final part of *Perilous Passage*, 'The Universe In Other Words (Ayahuasca)'. Literally on the shamanic trail, Wilson again gives up the illusory self and escapes the condition of being stuck here in time, in "ordinary consciousness", his motivation "to follow him there", into the regions of "cognitive dissonance" and the "infinitely ineffable". During one *ayahuasca* ceremony Wilson sees a Big Wheel or Being Wheel and his description suggests the mandarin complexity of this spinning mosaic, its mechanical, encyclopaedic, indefatigable sheer monstrousness: "Swirling spinning pre-columbian labyrinths homing in hideous antipathetic colours blazing - Blistering slotmachine menace wrath and perplexity, perpetual infernal videogame intelligence - Visually compulsive conglomerate vortexes nightmare vertiginous alien permutation - "Crucially, these "formulaic configurations" remind Wilson of Burroughs' words on Gysin's painting: ". . . an infinite series of images . . . leads you along a certain path like a row or series of patterns . . . a series of neural patterns which already exist." It is the recapitulation of these pre-existing patterns and their infinite permutation which Wilson experiences - as if Gysin's work had prepared him for his devastating encounter with the perpetual cosmic image bank.

an exquisite rehearsal

In addition to the prophetic nature of his work, it is Gysin's presence which appears to return, to be reconstituted in Wilson's relationship with the shaman and in Wilson's perception of an unidentified haunting presence. The *ayahuasca* sessions "are serious but lighthearted" and Don Roberto the shaman appears like Bedaya/Gysin as a sympathetic mentor with whom Wilson feels a telepathic connection: "I marvelled at the warmth and tenderness emanating from this truly stunning old man, wondering how I could ever express my own for him and knowing that the moment it was in my mind it was in his . . ." And at the fifth and final *ayahuasca* ceremony Wilson feels "a continual invisible presence behind me, beneficent, perhaps even curious, one of 'those who are

hidden'." Who *on earth* could that hidden man be? The reader may recall Wilson's earlier evocation of Bedaya, "poised in space, a disembodied eye, invisible, incorporeal, seeing but not seen." This ghostly return might be interpreted psychoanalytically as a projection on Wilson's part - symptomatic of the initiate's refusal to relinquish his relationship with the teacher, mentor, guide, and father figure. But, crucially, Bedaya is finally a *beneficent* and *curious* spirit - and he looks on kindly as the initiate finds his own way through - the final gift of a master to his initiate is the telepathic transmission of grace. Even though *ayahuasca* may not be the absolute culmination and fulfillment of Wilson's quest for a knowledge which will free him from the pain of time and the anguish of identity, still it confirms that he is on the right track - Gysin's magical spirit and the significance of his teachings have not been lost. There is a very moving sense of an unbroken spiritual bond, the initiate's perilous passage has led to this *ayahuasca* initiation and he discovers something of the truth behind the desire for non-being: "But to *be* non being . . . (Brion Gysin's request) . . . There is no basis in 'solid reality' for our experience when it comes to non being, which is really compulsive walking away . . . " Previously Wilson had written, "I am real as people walking away." Perhaps now it is time to return, forever changed, and write an account of his experiences . . . a book unlike any other, a book called *Perilous Passage*. This is Proust's approach in *A la recherche du temps perdu* : the writer, at the end of his book, must paradoxically return to the beginning, and begin to tell the story again, as if for the first time. But wouldn't that be an entirely different story, a quite different experience? And if that's the case, what exactly is the status of the text we have been reading? It is thrown entirely into doubt. It cannot be the definitive version of a life - could there really be any such thing? No, only writing as the exquisite rehearsal for that life, for some *other life*. *Perilous Passage* has not concluded - it is just about to begin . . .

Ian MacFadyen
London, June 2004

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