
ULYSSEAN CARNIVAL

Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's Trilogy¹

By Hena Maes-Jelinek

Had not Masters read to me . . . the story of the Trojan horse that became the seed of an overturned age or frame?

Carnival

I had expected him to worm his way into the Rose garden and slay his enemies. But instead the imperial design of the home coming lord and master had been converted into a colonial fable that spun its web in reverse order in the branches of the lofty rose tree over my head. The queen lay hidden in its branches.

The Four Banks of the River of Space

There can be no *Odyssey* without its descent among the clairvoyant dead.

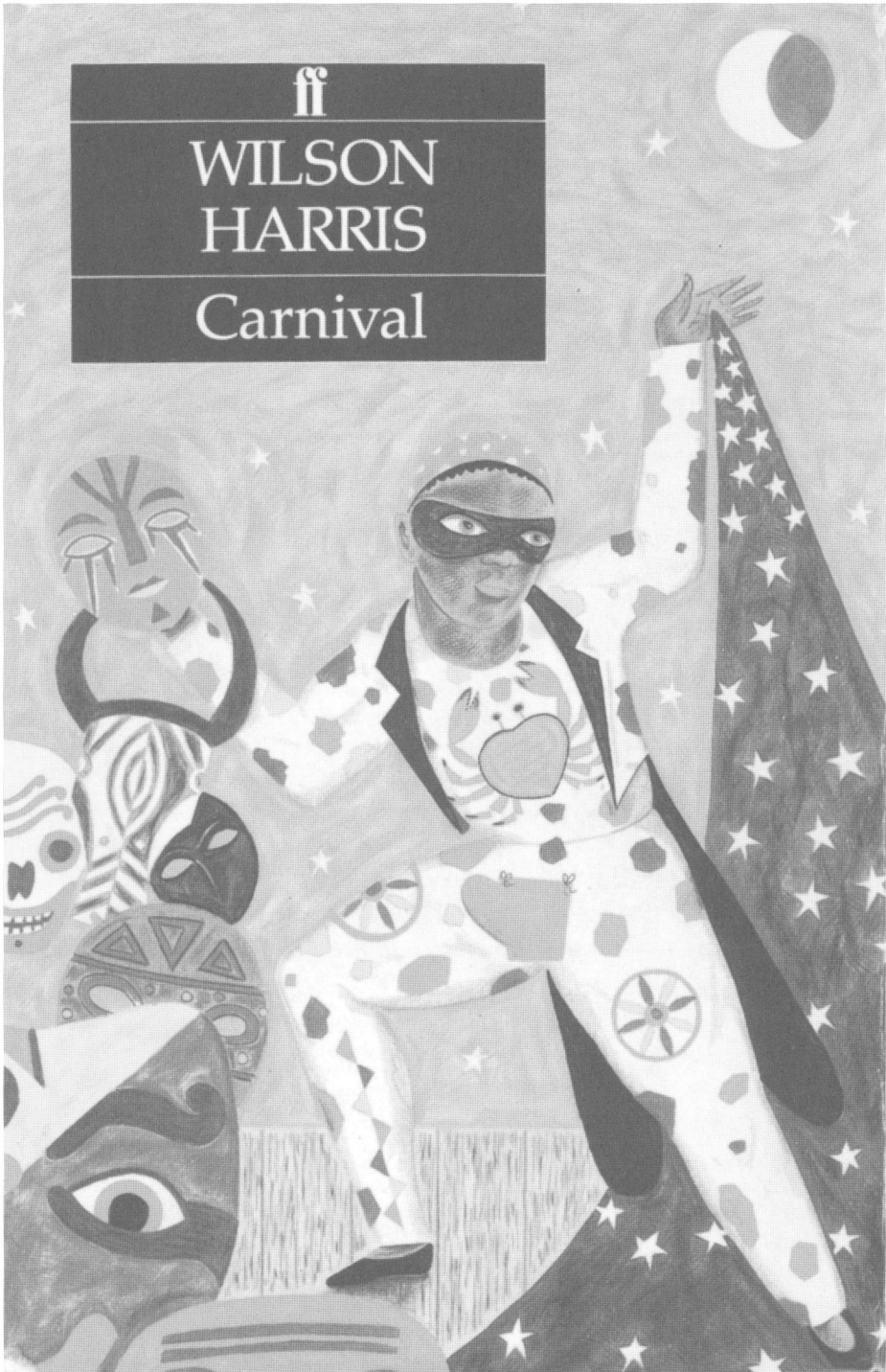
George Steiner, *Real Presences*

In his recently published autobiography² Wilson Harris describes the strong emotional impact he experienced as a child of eight when news reached his mother that his step-father had disappeared in the rainforests of Guyana. On the same day his mother opened a large black trunk that had belonged to his real father, from which she extracted a copy of *The Odyssey* and a wooden horse "carven from a Greenheart tree" (*Contemporary* 122). Harris writes about the first event of that memorable day:

My step-father's disappearance in that immense interior when I was a child was the beginning of an involvement with the enigma of quests and journeys through visible into invisible worlds that become themselves slowly visible to require further penetration into other invisible worlds without end or finality. (122)

Later that year Harris came upon a beggar not far from his home in Georgetown³ at a time when, though a young child, he was already reading Homer with his mother's help and may have even then unconsciously connected the beggar with the disguised Ulysses, who for so long had also been an absent father and husband, his whereabouts unknown, but was at last coming home:

Across half-a-century and more . . . [t]he fabric of his face [the beggar's] upon a floating tide of sorrow is stitched into Homer's beggar within a tapestry of gestating vision. . . . (123)



Published by Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1985.
Reprinted by Permission of the Author and Publisher.

The never resolved mystery of his step-father's disappearance into the jungle, his father's wooden horse, his reading *The Odyssey* as a sensitive, impressionable and imaginative child, the encounter with the Georgetown beggar, all seem to have provided Harris with a "series of subtle and nebulous links" (*Tradition* 28) of the kind he sees as the latent ground of the West Indian personality, while for the writer he was to become they turned into the seed of his growing, never-to-be-finished fictional tapestry.

Metamorphosed Homeric figures have peopled Harris's writing from his earliest works and are the major personae of his poetic sequence, *Eternity to Season* (1954), in which ordinary peasants and fishermen haunt the jungle and coastlands of Guyana, masked as ancient mythical Greek figures from both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.⁴ But it is mainly *The Odyssey* which underpins his fiction as an endless source of revisionary myths and metaphors and modulates his aesthetic and philosophic vision. Already in *Palace of the Peacock* Donne's boat expedition towards El Dorado parallels Ulysses' journey home but, in contrast with the Greek hero's vengeful return, ends with Donne's homecoming to a Pagan/Christian family and a vision of reconciliation, reversing the urge to violence and punishment that animated the crew through much of their quest. Harris himself draws an implicit parallel between Donne and Ulysses when he writes that his father's carven horse was "threaded into Homer's giant horse" and later resurrected as the horse ridden by conquistadorial Donne in *Palace* (*Contemporary* 125). Although the jungle and rivers of Guyana can hardly conjure up devastated Troy, there is an implicit comparison between the destruction of ancient civilizations and the disappearance of entire populations in Asia Minor and pre-Columbian America. The enduring spirit and invisible presence of the vanished folk already convey his perception of conquered and decimated peoples as natural and spiritual ancestors of mankind "within a descent of the imagination" (125). The presence among the crew of the old Arawak woman, ancient archetypal Egeria of the folk briefly transfigured into the youthful tempting beauty all long to possess, weaves the narrative thread of pursuit and conquest (of woman and territory) with a revised version of the Sirens episode in *The Odyssey*. The seducing chant Donne and the crew have to resist in the warring elements is not that of an external deceptive power but of their own uncontrolled passions of which they are freed only by the death of the youngest among them. Significantly also, they are successively then simultaneously deprived of both hearing *and* sight, rendered senseless by the "murderous rape and fury" (*Palace* 74) with which they pursue and fight over the unattainable object of their desire. This episode is again transformed and given new meaning and complexity in the relationship between Susan Forrestal and her lover in *The Waiting Room*.⁵

Other Homeric exploits are metamorphosed, their significance revised, in subsequent novels by Harris, but *The Carnival Trilogy* alone refers with obvious directness to *The Odyssey* in conjunction with two major literary landmarks of the Western tradition, *The Divine Comedy* and *Faust* as well as Pre- and Post-Columbian Amerindian myths and customs, thus offering an impressive quintessence of the Old World-New World symbiosis which informs his cross-culturalism. My purpose is to concentrate on the Ulyssean palimpsest⁶ in the trilogy and bring to light Harris's fertile integration of successive Western world views (antique, pre-Columbian, late medi-

eval and modern) into his narrative, a kind of epic of humanity, as he revises these views and gives shape to his developing vision. He never questions the sublimity nor significance of Homer's, Dante's or Goethe's work, all precursors and creators of vision in their own time. But he has repeatedly insisted on the need to renew the form and content of epic, allegory and myth, to re-vision as well as reverse the stereotypes they have given rise to and to see them as a community of texts and forms unhampered by the limitations of space and time. The dynamics of his revisions lies in his conviction that no character (whether god, mythical hero or ordinary man), no belief or type of behaviour can represent an absolute ideal. Their partiality must be recognized and they must be dislodged from recurring absolute frames of thought and demeanor. Indeed history and human experience tend to repeat themselves in reality and fiction, and Harris, who still adheres to the humanist view that literature can modify consciousness, suggests that the horrors of history and the suffering they generate might be avoided if men could envisage alternative consequences and imaginatively translate the predicament to which they see themselves confined by fate.

Guides as well as "daemons and furies" (*Four Banks* 3), the manifold essence of creativity, play a major role in Harris's referential epic, allegory and drama. Though unreservedly accepted in the masterpieces of the past, their appearance, albeit in a modified role, in Harris's trilogy has puzzled some readers who find it hard to account for them in a modern context. In *The Odyssey* gods and goddesses (mainly Athena) guide Ulysses through his journey and ordeals, though he also makes enemies among them (Poseidon, for example, who inspired an antithetical vision of the ancient god in *The Secret Ladder*). Virgil, Dante's guide to the Inferno and the mountain of Purgatory, links ancient epic and medieval allegory through his hero Aeneas, who, like Ulysses, descends into Hades. Though human, his prestige as a writer and creator of myth still makes him a superior guide descended from the pantheon of trustworthy mentors. As opposed to this, the guides in Harris's trilogy, Masters in *Carnival*, Ghost and Faust/Dr Faustus in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, Canaima, Alicia, Proteus and Harold in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, are mostly dead acquaintances of the protagonists, arising from "the collective unconscious" into their consciousness ("Comedy" 128) or haunting their dreams, though some may be seen as half mythical (*Everyman* Masters, Faustus and Canaima) while also referring back to earlier allegory and drama. The major difference with their earlier models is their humanity and ambivalence, their being, to use Harris's term again, mere "understudies" ("Comedy" 136), i.e., limited, partial substitutes of an unattainable whole, of "the mystery of intact reality," the "genius of creation" (*Carnival* 162), or of a "universal fathomless actor" (163). Even the gods in Harris's fiction have come down from their pedestal; they are often associated with the lost victims of history and partake of their humanity. So while being part of an unfathomable entity or wholeness, the guides in his fiction are nevertheless also ordinary human beings who at different stages of their life may have been, like Masters, both tyrant and victim but whose experience, post-mortem view and self-confessional need give them the requisite understanding and compassion to urge a reversal of patterns of violence and exploitation. They can still be deceptive, like Faustus in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, but also confront the traveller with

ordeals through which he learns to make the right choice, as when Robin Redbreast Glass discards a glorious but misleading rope in favor of a "true seam" (the thread of dynamic wholeness as opposed to absolute totality) when ascending the Mountain of Folly. In this capacity to distinguish between "LIKE YET UNLIKE FORCES" (23) lies the pivot of Harris's "convertible images" ("Comedy" 134) which, he suggests, are intrinsic to modern epic and allegory.⁷

Guides then are clearly not self-sufficient archetypes any more than their living interlocutors are traditional heroes moving towards a single fixed object. Since much of the trilogy's self-reflexiveness consists in discussing how events should be interpreted, analysing the characters' motivations as much as their behaviour, Harris's characters define themselves through function and thoughtful reaction to events and situations rather than enduring or typifying qualities or shortcomings. They are multi-dimensional, particularly the guiding figures who manifest themselves at different levels of the protagonist's consciousness, revealing different facets and layers of their own personality and transformative potential. Hence their own developing and shifting roles. In *Carnival Masters* first guides Weyl to the colonial underworld of his childhood, where he was to become a tyrannical overseer, then after his assassination as an exploiter, to the London underworld where he worked in a factory like any other poor West Indian migrant, while in the rest of the trilogy Ulyssean figures reveal by turns their cold-hearted, generous, vengeful and forgiving attitudes and potentialities. This undermining of persisting mythical archetypes and their fragmentation into a multiplicity of dissimilar characters in adversarial functions is in keeping with Harris's philosophy of existence and his apprehension of the evolutionary nature of the phenomenal world.

Like *The Odyssey*, the trilogy begins at home in New Forest, America (clearly Guyana) and first concentrates on the son figure, Telemachus, here Jonathan Weyl guided by Masters who dons successive different and partial masks (Masters the First, Masters the Second, etc.) in their reconstruction of the private and historical experiences that punctuate Jonathan's own Odyssey as a fiction writer who interprets the missed opportunities of the cultural clash between Europe and the Americas. Unlike *The Odyssey*, however, the scene of revenge takes place at the beginning and, as in *Palace*, yields to reconciliation at the end of the novel. Carnival as a specifically Caribbean cultural event used to be a temporary explosion of liberation only possible because inseparable from the oppressive order and codes against which it reacted. In Harris's fiction it is the comedy of existence that allows for the constant interplay of adversarial forces, and as an all-encompassing metaphor, it engenders the multiple transformations inherent in his concept of creation and fiction writing.⁸ It is both fact and process, exploration and self-discovery; it is concrete reality in whatever mask (including "masks of absolute regimes" [113]) but also its life-giving convertibility and therefore creativity. In his recreation of Masters' and his father's experience in New Forest, Jonathan is not only helped by "Masters the Fourth" (116) on an evolutionary chain of existence but by the news published in their youth in the paper *Argosy*, a name apparently derived from *Argo*, the ship in which Jason managed to secure the golden fleece after sailing between the wandering rocks, or even *Argos*, Ulysses' old dog. At his father's funeral the child Jonathan, to whom Masters had read

the story of the Trojan horse, was obsessed by the idea that his father's body was not in the hearse but in the horse that pulled it and which, frightened for no apparent reason, had backed into the garden and reduced it to a "drought-stage" (120). As he recalls the scene of the funeral procession and the slow-moving horse advancing through poverty-stricken New Forest, Jonathan no longer sees the "rock-horse" as mere destroyer of his garden but realizes that

therein lay the catalyst of modern allegory, modern fiction or biography of terrifying spirit to judge the age in which I lived. . . the fact was that we [Jonathan and his father] resided in the womb of a phantom horse as a seed of archaic revolution more enduring than novel or fashionable non-existence that perpetuates a lie. (120-21)

Clearly then, the devastating Trojan horse of colonialism becomes a pregnant "womb of space,"⁹ in Harris's terminology both individual psyche and cosmic theatre, at once the seat of, and the capacity for, metamorphosis. Martin is therefore a kind of revolutionary Ulysses, and the original hero's destructive invention is seen to contain a seed of change and "therapeutic genesis" (*Womb* 117), while in the process of the conversion of colonial deprivation the destructive image generates a "modern allegory," i.e., a revised regenerative "species of fiction" (*Tradition* 48) freed from static fictional codes.

Before commenting further on the Trojan horse as convertible image, it is worth drawing attention to parallel images of pregnancy and possible conversion in *Carnival*. One is of Masters' mother's "GLASS BODY" (122), in which he envisions his own pre-natal existence and survival when his mother was threatened with abortion then saved from it by the child's legal though not real father (another pre-natal experience occurs in *The Infinite Rehearsal*). The mother's humiliation and the menace of deprivation she had experienced were transformed into the "genius of love" (30). Another image of fertility is that of the "glass cathedral" (122), in which Jonathan and Amaryllis were taken as children by Masters on Easter Sunday, and Jonathan, struck by the gloom and radiance in the edifice (reminiscent of similar contrasts in the forest), had a vision of himself ascending and descending "into a mysterious constellation of evolutionary spaces" (122). Thus the narrative weaves together a number of spaces of gestation such as "the cathedral-horse" (123) in which Jonathan and Amaryllis later come together in a creative sexual encounter shortly before their marriage. Their love-making in what becomes the belly of a cosmic horse of space (a wedding horse parallel to the father's funeral horse [126]) is an extraordinary metamorphosis of Ulysses' cunning invention, initiating an equally creative "complex marriage of cultures" (124), not in forgetfulness or sex escapism but with a deep awareness of past sorrows and deprivations.

Another fertile space is the interior of the ship on which Jonathan sails to Europe with the guiding Masters in 1957. As they dialogue on their respective roles in their journey from the colonial Inferno, the body of the ship becomes a "womb of glass" (89) hit by a storm, a variation of the storm through which the old Arawak woman guides

the crew in *Palace of the Peacock*. The terror of beauty, of pity, of gentleness even that the storm evinces purges Jonathan, as it were, of the sense of peril and evil he experiences in the chaos of the storm. For the first time also he has a vision of Christ when he dreams he sees Him walking on the sea through the glass side of the ship. When he later reconstructs his father's death and meditates on its possible meaning, the Christ *persona* reappears associated with "the half-prancing donkey or mule or horse" (111) that engulfed his father, a lawyer, as he was crushed coming out of court by the wheel of a dray-cart drawn by the donkey. He was then exhausted and broken by his failure to save from a death sentence an Amerindian prince who had killed his dying mother in accordance with the law of his people. Martin Weyl's plea for the recognition of the charisma of ancient pagan law had been disregarded though, as Jonathan now sees, there was a similarity between the hideous imperatives of pagan rituals and the modern "games of nuclear holocaust" or the "advocacy of the body as fodder for the state," which are tantamount to "articulating an ancient ritual dressed up in the vestments of purist obsession" (142). In the revision of Martin's death, the donkey becomes "resurrection mule," while the "savage heart" he had so passionately defended was handed from his rent side (an analogy with Christ's?) to Masters to pass on to Jonathan (143). The donkey that caused Martin's death is thus as ambivalent as Ulysses' transfigured Trojan horse, and the cross-cultural fusion of the two images into "Christ's Trojan donkey," the novel's central metaphor, epitomizes the transformation of an implacable ruse into a potential "new beast, a new heart, a new love upon which to ride" (142). By its reversal of a stratagem of conquest and destructiveness, it is one of the best examples of Harris's "convertible images." It suggests that the relentless order of things and patterns of behaviour represented in ancient epic could have been broken and reshaped with the advent of a Christian civilization, whose original revolutionary purpose obviously miscarried. But the "carnival transubstantiation" (*Womb* 35) generated by the trilogy's dynamic Ulysean iconography still offers a vision of genuine transformation.

Martin's and Masters' efforts to save the "pagan body" and "savage heart" (139, 47) of the Amerindian prince introduce another major thread in the trilogy's narrative texture, one which exemplifies the development of humanity along an "evolutionary/revolutionary" (119) chain of being and implies that past, present and future states coalesce in man's condition. This concept derives from and accounts for the protagonists' repeated return to the past, immediate or remote or, very significantly, primeval. While giving them glimpses of the future, which allows Ghost in *The Infinite Rehearsal* to say "I am the memory of the future" (43), this free voyaging in time contributes to the multi-dimensionality of the characters but does not entirely explain it since this is also the outgrowth of psychological and emotional agencies. Though perceptible in the whole trilogy, the evolutionary thread stands out prominently in the second novel and adds to the representativeness of Ulysses as a comprehensive figure of human limitations and possibilities, one in which man's most primitive features and his endless capacity to progress persist indissociably through time and timelessness. These two dimensions co-exist in this novel more than ever before since the narrator, Robin Redbreast Glass, is dead but resurrected as "immortal youth," writing his autobiography "from the other side of W.H.'s blind/seeing mind" (47).

Although the two writers are “adversaries,” they both approach “the ruling concepts of civilization . . . from the ruled or apparently eclipsed side of humanity” (vii).

Robin is mostly guided by Ghost (a further removed layer of being from Robin), who has arisen from the sea and dialogues with him as he writes his autobiography. Ghost is several times described as “hollow voyager,” a shadow which can be filled by conquistadorial *and* victimized body (1), the recipient of the meaning sifted from men’s actions, good or bad, none of which is ever completely lost. He or “IT” cannot be associated with any particular being but could be seen as an embodiment of the collective unconscious which, as suggested above, emerges into consciousness in the writing process. He is the “numinous scarecrow” who has developed from the Idiot Nameless of Harris’s earlier fiction, hunted down by the immigration officer, Ulysses Frog, soon after his apparition to Robin. The officer is accompanied by his mistress, Calypso, who sings a well-known Caribbean song which, like the lotus flower Robin’s alter ego (Peter) feeds on, expresses the “drug of deprivation” (30), the death wish of the masses (58). Yet her singing and dancing are also an expression of survival. The paradoxical association of the epic hero with “Frog” and his ruthless control of the world’s beaches to keep out its swarming refugees (in a sense represented by Ghost) brings to light yet another layer in his personality. His name, like “Redbreast,” draws attention to the animal component in each character (the crab and crocodile in *Carnival* are other examples), traces of an animal primitiveness which seems to have vanished but are in fact ambivalent “fossil strata” “angelic, terrifying, daemonic” (Petersen 16-23), susceptible of erupting unpredictably in both man and nature.¹⁰ One is reminded here of Ovid’s awareness of a similar animal self as he enters his final metamorphosis “back” into his forthcoming death in David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*:

I try to imagine the sky with all its constellations, the Dog, the Bear, the dragon and so on, as an extension of myself, as part of my further being. . . . Beaked, furred, fanged, tusked, clawed, hooved, snouted, [the creatures] will settle in us, re-entering their old lives deep in our consciousness. And after them, the plants, also themselves. . . . Then little by little the firmament. The spirit of things will migrate back into us. (96)

In Robin’s narrative the Frog facet in Ulysses points to the cold determination with which, obsessed as he is by conquest, he wears the uniform of “magistrate, admiral and immigration officer” who wished to entrap the “Beast of paradise” from time immemorial (10). Paradise is the idealistic absolute conquerors have always wanted to reach while the Beast, if I understand rightly, may be the victims the conquerors hunt down and exploit in their search for “the map of heaven” (9), which is why Beast appears to be an ambivalent version or reverse side of Ghost. The wish to conquer and its concomitant longing for power and immortality chiefly materialize in Faust, whose myth in his grandfather’s revised version greatly influenced Robin. Interestingly, Faust sometimes looks at him with Quetzalcoatl ancient eyes (64), for the Mexican god too was obsessed with youth and immortality and was fed with the heart of human victims to ensure the renewal of time. As a conjunction of antithetical yet complementary animality, bird and snake (like Frog and Redbreast, “lost golden

species”), Quetzalcoatl is one of Robin’s “savage antecedents” who can help him approach “the spirit of value” as he dreams “[his] way backwards in time into the ancient workshop of the gods” (6).

All voyages of exploration in Harris’s fiction involve a movement backwards and forwards, not just in an attempt at freedom from the constraints of time but because in the backward movement to retrieve what Harris has called the “fossil of psyche” and forwards towards “a vanishing future” (*Fossil* 11) lies the prelude to metamorphosis. Robin’s alternative movements from past to future involve a vertiginous approach to the very origin of creation whereas, when transported into the future, he glimpses a “religious hope” (44) in Emma, the beloved adopted sister who in the year AD 2025 becomes Archbishop of Canterbury.¹¹ He meets her in a kind of light-year tunnel which is just one of many possible seats of transmutation:

Each relic of time, each built passageway, each sculpted tunnel or bowl or room . . . glimmered with the cruelties of the past yet with a theatre of new-born spirit to breach or transform a moment of terror. (56)

Actually, much of the setting is cosmic and ranges from the bottom of the sea to the visible and invisible firmament. The following passage, for example, evokes an interpenetration of spaces:

I saw the new moon like a curved fingernail in the late, afternoon Old New Forest sky. I stared at it with intensity. As if my hollow voyager lost and lost and found again and again had pared it from ancient Homer’s webbed hand with immeasurable Joycean delicacy and drawn it on the sunset sky. Webbed Homeric hand. Impossible human bird. Impossible male, female animal. NIGHT WAS FALLING. My own fingernails were black with earthen light. (3)

The allusion to Joyce, whose re-writing of *The Odyssey* Harris greatly admires, is only one among numerous examples in the novel of multi-textuality, a more appropriate term, I feel, than intertextuality which posits the self-referentiality of literature incompatible with his conviction that fiction is still a vehicle of meaning and value. Multi-textuality for Harris is more than a game and offers parallel expressions of his own vision or the germs of re-vision. To return to the impression of illimited space and timelessness in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, their effect is not to reduce man’s stature or minimize the significance of his experiences, whether joy or suffering and terror. It is rather to entice him from fixed and limited horizons (hence perhaps Harris’s obsession with Ulysses, the eternal voyager) towards an awareness of humanity at large, of a continuous existence (human, animal, natural, cosmic) in which the individual is a link in a frail yet enduring chain joining the survivors and the dead.¹²

When at the end of the novel Robin Redbreast disappears as narrator, the postscript is written by Ghost who returns to the sea from where he arose at the beginning of the narrative:

I am the ghostly voyager in time, in space, in memory, but always
I return to the vast ocean, the rolling seas and the great deeps.
(85)

His postscript confirms the reader's suspicion that even though he may never have written a line before (86), he is nevertheless the true source of authorship only temporarily assumed by Robin and his adversarial interlocutor, W.H., for, as Ghost claims, it is he who "[taps] the innermost resources of eclipsed traditions in the refugee voices that W.H. heard in the sea" (86). It also makes clear that if Ulysses first appeared in the narrative in a negative role, "epic lover yet doomed, jealous scavenger of humanity" (12), he also partakes of Ghost, whose hollowness, and therefore openness and transmutability, is nevertheless "the ground of creative conscience and value" (51). This becomes particularly clear in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* whose second epigraph from Tennyson's "Ulysses" is an apt transition between the two novels:

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.

Space is lacking to develop here the effect and role of all Homeric strands and figures in the trilogy. Tiresias, another obsessive figure in Harris's work, in *The Infinite Rehearsal* a band leader, strike leader and androgynous blind/seeing seer, guides Robin down the Mountain of Folly to skull and explains the role of the Beast whom Robin then glimpses. Another metaphor expanded from Harris's earlier fiction and diversified is the rock coming alive, possibly inspired by the "wandering Rocks" passage in *The Odyssey*. Whereas in Joyce's *Ulysses* the rocks are a major obstacle to change either as the indomitable pillars of Church and imperialist state between which Bloom's "throwaway" finds its way down the Liffey, or as passive Dubliners,¹³ in the trilogy, whether in "waterfall oracle" (*Carnival*) or close to the god-rock near the Macusi waterfall (*Four Banks*), the rocks are humanized into "dancing boulders" (*Carnival* 110) or "processional rock[s]," or "rock visionary flesh and blood" (*Four Banks* 39) in which Anselm sees "'live absence' [turning] into 'presence'" (39). Of course, the chief, manifold metaphor in the trilogy is the ship, but to comment on it would require another essay, and Harris himself has recently interpreted its meanderings and metamorphoses through the three novels.¹⁴

Four Banks is largely "a divine comedy of the Master's homecoming" (63), in which the moral design of "epic/allegoric theatre" (64) transforms the Ulysean syndrome more radically than ever before.¹⁵ In the ancient epic Ulysses is an absolute sovereign—actually a hero/monster—who, on his return, assuages a merciless vengeance on the suitors who covet his wife and his kingdom. However admirable he may be in some respects, the destructive idealism, jealousy and implacable vengefulness he acts out have now become a major threat to civilization and the very existence of humanity.¹⁶ So is his absolute sovereignty when imitated in modern, highly technological societ-

ies. In Anselm's book of dreams his personality is fragmented into a number of actors who share "the burden of Ulysean Carnival kingship" (59), become partial selves subject to conversion (hence "Carnival"). Anselm, the Guyanese scientist-artist who has taken this name out of admiration for the one-time Bishop of Canterbury, returns home in search of El Dorado/Ithaca/the City of God, a conjunction which suggests that the quest for a lost home, lost civilization and people is a religious as well as a cross-cultural and even psychological experience since this means coming to the doors of the unconscious. His return is stimulated by Canaima, a Guyanese counterpart of Ulysses, for he is a humanized personification of Kanaima, the Amerindian God of vengeance. Though a former murderer, he is nevertheless Anselm's first guide and, as the quester is shocked into realizing later, his own half-brother. It is a partly amended Canaima who initiates him into the role of the daemonic and of furies in both life and creation and warns him against the tautology of vengeance in belief, statecraft and poetry, which Anselm gradually recognizes as a formerly unacknowledged motive in his own family.

Three Ulysses share the burden of the mythic hero: Anselm's uncle Proteus, pork-knocker and beggar; Harold, his brother, the lover who abused the Rose Twins, mothers of Anselm and Canaima, and Simon, the conqueror, a British officer and would-be governor of Guyana. As Harris wrote,

Odysseus has been drowning in the Caribbean sea and in the oceans for centuries, drowning yet resuscitating in rehearsals of Troy to fight wars of colonial expansion and conquest. It is no longer possible for him to arrive in New World El Dorados that are in equation with ancient Ithacas as a single man. He has become plural and is borne upon the shoulders—re-born within the flesh—of many cultures. (*Radical* 91-92)

Similarly, there are several thieves and suitors, just as there are several queens, the Rose twins and Penelope, who was first married to Simon, then to Ross before they emigrated as missionaries to Guyana where Anselm met them in 1948.

As partial actors and embodiments of Odyssean archetypes, all these characters are involved in several "rehearsals" of the basic Homeric drama, acting out in Anselm's dream and "live-fossil theatre" (18) their many-sided and overlapping roles. The "King of thieves," for example, first identifies with the thief on Calvary's Hill who rejected the paradise offered by Christ and has tried ever since to conquer or steal it on every continent. A cross-cultural figure, pre-Columbian and ancient Greek as much as Christian, he is "Black Pizarro" (17), a Guyanese pork-knocker, symbolic seeker after all the El Dorados of this world and an equation to all the thieves or suitors who sought to (dis-)possess Penelope (56). She presents him, however, as a "reformed character in the City of God" (55), and he is another ghostly scarecrow whose voice instructs Anselm in the roles Proteus and Harold are to play in his recreation of personal and universal epic. Proteus figures in the first alternative version of the Homecoming when, as a Ulysean beggar coming to the gates of Home, he is killed by the thorn one Rose-Queen sends to his brow (62). But his voluntary discarding of the robe of lord and master gives his part the seed of a "reversal of the . . . premises of myth

(65) and of a conversion of dispossession in the half-ruined colony. When Anselm comes upon Harold, wearing the rags he (Anselm) has *stolen* from Proteus, Harold confesses that, though married to Alicia, he had slept successively with the Rose Twins but had never been told by Alicia (kind and generous to Anselm but a vengeful Clytemnestra towards Harold) that he made the first Rose pregnant until the second Rose, pregnant in turn, told him he already had an heir in Anselm. The hatreds of the past are transmuted into forgiveness when Anselm, first raising his hand to kill Harold and avenge both mother and “mother-nature,” renounces vengeance and blesses the father returned to him from the kingdom of the Dead.

The last performance of the Homecoming is shared by Anselm, Penelope and Ross. In all “rehearsals” Penelope rather than Ulysses plays the central role, for the coat of tradition she keeps weaving and unravelling, also a coat of wisdom like the Arawak woman’s kerchief in *Palace*, represents the basic pattern of creation and metamorphosis in this as in all Harrisian fiction, the “infinite rehearsal” of missed opportunities, in order to retrieve the victims of colonialism from the abyss. It is a role she is particularly fit to play since, as she points out, “women—even queens—have long been the property of the realm” (159). Perhaps because she is so central, like all women in Harris’s fiction, it is not Ulyssean Simon who changes but Penelope’s perception of him. He had come home to find her with Ross and although they were not deceiving him and in any case his real union with Penelope had ended, she and Ross always felt guilty after he died at El Alamein. At the end of the novel Anselm, Penelope and Ross progress towards the ruined mission house/El Dorado/Ithaca/City of God,¹⁷ each carrying a Macusi child retrieved from the river where they drowned. In a significant reversal of conquest, *they* have been captured by the “savage” Macusis to whom they surrender as they recognize in the primitive child they carry their own suppressed refusal, from childhood onwards, to come to terms with some painful truth about themselves (which therefore drowned in their unconscious): Anselm that he was the brother of the daemon Canaima; Penelope that Simon (whom she now sees in the child she carries) became obsessed with vengeance as a boy, which drove him, like Ulysses, to become the hero she married, hiding within herself yet from herself a “spectre” of conquest; while Ross finally sees in the beautiful young singer and dancer he carries the creativity of the Macusis, of whom he was suspicious, the power of their native rhythm and speech to transform the imperial language, and the possibility for the native child to take up Penelope’s role: “the miracle of hope in a child-queen who might still breach an epic formula” (161).

In the trilogy as a whole the fabulous metamorphoses of ancient Homeric myth provide a remarkable summing up of Harris’s philosophy and world view: first, Ulysses’ cunning invention and instrument of conquest is shown to contain a seed of rebirth and reconciliation; then, the “rehearsal” (potentially “infinite”) of past conflicts and tragedies from different angles and states of being encompassing the multi-layered unconscious/consciousness of those who were involved in them gave them a glimpse of possible salvation; finally, the third novel evokes the incipient reversal of the consequences of the Homecoming to historical, natural, primeval origins. Of all the homecomings in Harris’s fiction,¹⁸ this, it seems to me, most eloquently and subtly hints at further developments, now engendered in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*. Through

his metamorphoses and “rehearsals” Harris’s Ulysses has been steering from one bank of the river of space to another without casting anchor finally. Moving between two worlds, it is as if he had made his the Homeric hero’s answer to the cyclop when he said he was called “No-man,” as if indeed a nameless scarecrow without a fixed identity in the kingdom of the living and the dead, he kept freeing himself from persisting urges towards greatness and destructiveness, opening himself up to different kinds of being to reverse the hero’s single-minded drive to conquest. In this process, he is both fictional and psychical medium through which at the end Anselm (who has been successively Telemachus, a suitor and Ulysses), Penelope (the Queen) and Ross (the major suitor) forgive and become reconciled with their own past and “savage” origins. Yet theirs is no final Homecoming either, for when they surrender to their primitive captors, it is as if they boarded Ulysses’ ship for yet another journey on the travelling earth. As Julia says in *The Tree of the Sun*, “home is always another journey” (91).

NOTES

1. The trilogy includes *Carnival* (1985); *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990). A single-volume paperback edition of the trilogy with an introduction by Harris was also published by Faber and Faber in 1993.

2. “Wilson Harris.” *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* 16 (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992), 121-37.

3. The vision of the beggar, also a recurring figure in Harris’s writing, may have been the seed of his imaginative encounter with Black Marsden in the novel by that name.

4. It is interesting to note that 36 years later Derek Walcott was moved to reiterate Wilson Harris’s experiment, transforming poor West Indian fishermen into Homeric personae and giving them, like Harris, a mythological dimension (*Omeros*, 1990). Walcott has also written recently a play called *The Odyssey*. For fairly obvious historical and geographical reasons, Homer’s epic has been a major source of inspiration to the Caribbean imagination.

5. On this subject, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, *Wilson Harris* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 92-94.

6. Jean-Pierre Durix discusses the Ulysean palimpsest in *The Infinite Rehearsal* and the novel’s many intertextual features in “The Palimpsest of Fiction.” *The Infinite Rehearsal*, *Wilson Harris. The Uncompromising Imagination*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1991), 210-20.

7. On Harris’s conception of allegory, see “Comedy and Modern Allegory,” *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies—Then and Now*, eds. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 127-40. See also Stephen Slemon, “Revisioning Allegory: Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*,” *Kunapipi* 8.2 (1986): 45-55.

8. On this subject, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, “‘Carnival’ and Creativity in Wilson Harris’s Fiction,” *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*, ed. Michael Gilkes (MacMillan Caribbean, 1989), 45-61.

9. See Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space. The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport, Connecticut: 1983).

10. The ancients were aware of such animal dimensions as is obvious from the many metamorphoses of their gods and heroes into animals.

11. Shortly after the novel was published, the German Lutheran Church elected a female bishop, while in 1992 the Anglican Church gave women access to the priesthood. So it seems that in this too Harris was ahead of his time.

12. The close link between the survivors and the dead and their interdependence is a major theme in the trilogy, which cannot be developed here.

13. Harris indirectly pays homage to Joyce by transforming his “Bloomsday” into “Boomsday” (45), in connection with the dead noise Tiger’s band makes in the City of Skull.

14. See Wilson Harris, “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 27.1 (1992): 13-25. This article was also published in *Temenos* 13 (1992): 69-85.

15. For a general and detailed analysis of the novel, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, “Unfinished Genesis: *The Four Banks of the River of Space*,” *Wilson Harris. The Uncompromising Imagination* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1991), 230-45.

16. Obviously, Harris has little sympathy for heroic excesses and what George Steiner calls the "sanctified bestialities" of the *Divine Comedy*. "Dante Now: The Gossip of Eternity. 1976," *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 181.

17. Though Harris already called El Dorado "the City of God" in his 1967 essays, *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, the religious strand seems increasingly foregrounded in his later writing though dissociated from any institutionalized church. One must also beware of equating his conception of God with pure transcendence. In *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* God is said to be "multi-dimensional" (29).

18. Apart from *Palace of the Peacock*, see also *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* and *The Tree of the Sun*, as well as the early poem "Agamemnon" in *Eternity to Season*.

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Durix, Jean-Pierre. "The Palimpsest of Fiction. *The Infinite Rehearsal*." *Wilson Harris. The Uncompromising Imagination*. Ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1991. 210-20.
- Harris, Wilson. *Eternity to Season*. London: New Beacon Books, 1954 and 1978.
- . *Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber and Faber, 1960.
- . *The Secret Ladder*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963.
- . *The Waiting Room*. London: Faber and Faber, 1967.
- . *Tradition, the Writer and Society. Critical Essays*. London: New Beacon Books, 1967.
- . *Fossil and Psyche*. The University of Texas at Austin: Occasional Publication. African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, 1974.
- . *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977.
- . *The Tree of the Sun*. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.
- . *The Womb of Space. The Cross-Cultural Imagination*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- . *Carnival*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.
- . *The Infinite Rehearsal*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.
- . "Comedy and Modern Allegory: a Personal View." *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies—Then and Now*. Eds. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1989. 127-40.
- . *The Four Banks of the River of Space*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- . "The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 27.1 (1992): 13-25. Also in *Temenos* 13 (1992): 69-85.
- . *The Radical Imagination. Lectures and Talks by Wilson Harris*. Eds. Alan Riach and Mark Williams. University of Liège: L3—Liège Language Literature, 1992.
- . *Wilson Harris. Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* 16. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992.
- . *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
- Maes-Jelinek, Hena. *Wilson Harris*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982.
- . "Unfinished Genesis: *The Four Banks of the River of Space*." *Wilson Harris. The Uncompromising Imagination*. Ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1991. 230-45.
- . "'Carnival' and Creativity in Wilson Harris's Fiction." *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*. Ed. Michael Gilkes. Macmillan Caribbean: Warwick University Caribbean Studies, 1989. 45-61.
- Malouf, David. *An Imaginary Life*. 1978; rpt. Sydney: Picador, 1980.
- Petersen, Kirsten Holst, and Rutherford Anna. "Enigma of Values: An Introduction." *Enigma of Values*. Ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1975. 9-41.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Revisioning Allegory: Wilson Harris's *Carnival*." *Kunapipi* 8.2 (1986): 45-55.
- Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*. Oxford University Press, 1978.