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CHAPTER 12

Wilson Harris

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The Guyanese novelist, poet and critic Wilson Harris was born in 1921 of mixed European, African and Amerindian ancestry. While working as a land surveyor in the Guyanese interior he contributed poems, stories and essays to *Kyk-over-al*, a Georgetown magazine; he published two collections of poems in Guyana in the early fifties, then emigrated to England at the end of the decade. His first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*, came out in 1960 after he had discarded several manuscripts. He has now written 19 novels and two volumes of novellas. His work includes four volumes of essays and a number of critical articles on post-colonial criticism.

From the very beginning Harris rejected the realistic mode of writing characteristic of the main tradition in English fiction because it is too intent on capturing the actual or the external reality at the expense of the unconscious in both man and nature. He associates realism with 'linear persuasion' and 'restrictive convention' and regards it as part of the prevailing ideology of a given period, a fact which makes it authoritarian and inadequate to render the 'disembodied psychical world' of the Caribbean. The major sources of his own vision are Guyanese history and the impressive landscapes of his native country. Both stimulated him to a never-ending quest for the 'lost body', the eclipsed presence and soul of those defeated by European conquest on the American continent. His experimental fiction, deeply rooted in the West Indian experience, explores the lost, hidden, unconscious and unacknowledged elements that shaped the West Indian psyche and must be retrieved and digested before any genuine liberation from past errors, any genuine renewal can take place in the individual and society. He perceives similar densities in the landscape which is alive with the spirit of earlier generations, vanished Caribs, barely surviving Amerindians, runaway slaves and their oppressors. But the landscape is also animated with a deep unacknowledged livingness spreading from the natural to the human and animal worlds, as expressed in 'the bark and wood turned into lightning flesh', or 'The enormous starry dress [the tree] now wore spread itself all around into a full majestic gown from which emerged the intimate column of a musing neck, face and hands, and twinkling feet.'¹ Harris's writing stimulates the reader to a different kind of vision which denies the passivity of both people and nature, a consequence of the Renaissance conquest long taken for granted.

The landscape, in the early novels particularly, is the outer equivalent of the characters' inner psychological space, marked by fossilized but convertible scars of a terrifying past. Harris, who challenges conventional views of history, does not believe in the so-called 'historylessness' of the West Indies, and he thinks that the traumas of West Indian experience (exile, the dismemberment of peoples, slavery and exploitation), the uncertainties and instability they gave rise to, can be transformed into a source of creativity through memory, consciousness and imagination. This kind of approach precludes the use of language as a mere tool. Harris's multi-levelled narratives progress through the juxtaposition and the interplay of multi-faceted images repeatedly transformed as they express the protagonist's changing vision. Indeed the essential features in all aspects and elements of Harris's fiction are 're-vision' and conversion.

Harris's writing as a whole has been shaped from the start by a sense of movement, a fluidity of language and imagery. Already in his poetry he dealt with the contrasts and polarizations in both nature and West Indian society, while alluding to a third nameless dimension within and beyond phenomenal and social realities: 'The tremendous voyage between two worlds/is contained in every hollow shell, in every name that echoes/a nameless bell.' His verse reflects what he sees as a necessary reconciliation of opposites by freely mixing the concrete with the metaphorical or the outer with inner planes of existence: 'So life discovers the remotest beaches in time/ that are always present in action: the interior walls of being/ open like a mirrorless pool, the ocean's nostalgia/ and the stormy communication of truth turn still deeply/ like settlement and root.'² His dynamic view of existence accounts for his many-layered and paradoxical language, for his juxtaposition of contradictory terms which challenge ordinary modes of perception and thought as in 'blossoming coals of immortal imperfection'. *Eternity to Season*, originally subtitled 'Poems of Separation and Reunion', is already a 'revised' epic in which the characters, called after Homeric heroes, are humble Guyanese labourers given a mythological stature. Also at this early stage, Harris gave his own idiosyncratic interpretation of Homeric adventures, as he was later to do in his *Carnival* trilogy, just as he was to give new significance to Christian and Amerindian myths. His free borrowing from many cultures is one way among many in which he attempts to break down barriers between men and different civilizations and makes him a pioneer of cross-culturalism, to whose emergence he contributed. While Harris's vision is equally original in poetry, essays and fiction, he is primarily a novelist though his narratives often have the concentrated richness of poetry and often demand the same minute reading and explication.

His fiction started to be published at a crucial time for both the nascent West Indian fiction and the novel in English, since in the fifties and early sixties many British and American writers were challenging established traditions as well as the experimentalism of the modernist writers considered as too elitist and reactionary. The dissolution of values and forms after the horrors of two world wars had left the Western world in the kind of psychological and spiritual void experienced at all times by West Indians with far greater and tragic

intensity. This loss of certainty gave rise to a resurgence of the realistic novel while experimental fiction developed into post-modernism which emphasized the absence of values or of any referent and generally offered a pessimistic, even apocalyptic, vision of modern civilization. Wilson Harris pointed out the irrelevance of both trends to a 'native' art of fiction and was among the post-colonial writers who felt they stood at the beginning, not the end of an era and contributed to a renaissance of so-called 'diminished man', fictionalizing their sense of the future. He warned in particular against the influence on West Indian writers of the postwar European art of despair and proposed an 'art of compassion' concerned with the impact of history on the ordinary 'obscure human person'.

Much of Harris's fiction recreates the catastrophic experiences of West Indian history both as facts and as psychological states to be 'digested' by the individual consciousness. Many of his novels present an actual and an inner confrontation between a conqueror and/or oppressor and his victim(s) as well as the traumas that resulted from the violation of a people or of an individual soul. But they firmly ignore the temptations of what is now called 'resistance literature'. Harris, who has always rejected all absolutes, refuses to replace one kind of one-sided stance by another. Rather he explores possibilities of rebirth and of genuine community between polarized people(s) and antithetical ways of being. This recurrent theme determines his conception of character, narrative structure and texture as well as his style. He equates dominant and fixed forms in art with authoritarian and static social structures, local, national or international. His fluid mode of expression renders the necessary movement between various or opposite poles of life as well as the mobility of consciousness.

Harris's first major opus, *The Guyana Quartet*, offers a composite picture of Guyanese life: the paradoxes and unpredictable manifestations of an extravagant nature; the historical vestiges, visible and invisible, that give each area a specific 'spirit of the place'; the geographically contrasting settlements outside the two major cities and the activities of a multiracial population, often self-divided and alienated from its 'lost' or unintegrated groups such as the Amerindians, or still living in the interior, the descendants of runaway slaves. The characters range from illiterate labourers and peasants, experienced money lenders and well-to-do farmers, to the educated young generation and the intellectual representatives of a technological civilization. *Palace of the Peacock* in particular initiates what Harris was to call 'a fiction that seeks to consume its own biases'.³ This refers at once to his working method (his repeated scanning and revisions of his own writing) and to the fictional material he keeps reinterpreting in his narratives in order to revise what is necessarily the partial and biased vision of each narrator and/or character, since a global vision of human experience with its contradictions and antagonisms is impossible; hence his expression 'unfathomable wholeness'. His repetitive yet always different creative process is summed up in the notion of 'infinite rehearsal', already illustrated in the plot of *Palace of the Peacock*. The novel opens with the murder of Donne, the conqueror, by Mariella, his

exploited Amerindian mistress, representative of her people. Actually, there are several versions of Donne's death, who may have been hanged or have drowned with his crew, for historical facts, transmitted subjectively, are after all uncertain. But Mariella's act of vengeance epitomizes the never-resolved conflict between conqueror and colonized while offering to Donne's spiritual *alter ego* the possibility to re-live that conflict from a different perspective. It is followed by the quintessential re-enactment of the first and all actual successive expeditions into the heartland of Guyana and the exploitation of land and people by waves of invaders in search of a legendary El Dorado: 'Rule the land ... and you rule the world', Donne exclaims, with that mixture of despotic idealism and brutality characteristic of imperialism.

The ensuing narrative offers an imaginative 're-vision' of such an imperialist conquest. Donne, the ruthlessly ambitious skipper (whose namesake, the seventeenth-century English poet, evokes the Renaissance creative imagination) leads a multiracial crew from the savannahs through the rain forest, hunting down the Amerindian folk they want to use as cheap labour. As they pursue them on a nameless river, the obstacles they meet provoke their 'second death' (also a psychological dying to their former oppressive selves) until Donne reaches the waterfall above which the folk have taken refuge. The reconstruction of the expedition is a 'dream', the function or process which allows for depth and the freedom of imagination – unrestricted by space and time – by which Harris's characters bridge life and death, the conscious and the unconscious, in their recreation of the past. The revision of their trials renders with striking immediacy the real obstacles the crew face on the rapids and the corresponding obstructions in their soul. Just as the crew are real men, moved now by murderous instincts, now by a deceptive idealism, they are also 'the crew every man mans and lives in his inmost ship and theatre and mind'. The main effect of their trials is to shake them out of their sense of a single and fixed identity, though they are not aware of it until they come together in the manifold metaphor of the peacock's tail. When the I-narrator says at the outset 'I dreamt I awoke with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye', he reveals the material and immaterial perspectives interwoven in the narrative and the double vision that enables him to penetrate the blind actions of the past and envisage a transformation of their effects and consequences.

The conquest of the Americas need not have been so destructive. The Pre-Columbians and the Europeans were both imprisoned by rigid values and codes of behaviour, which the meeting could have undermined rather than produce destructive stasis. In Harris's view, any catastrophe which breaks down petrified situations or inflexible attitudes contains seeds of rebirth. This is why, without denying its terrifying effects, he sees even in a destructive process of dislocation or dismemberment (in *Palace the Amerindians*, then Donne's and his crew's experience) an opportunity for, and a prelude to, salutary change and a regenerated consciousness.

The *Quartet's* other novels also illustrate the frightening but necessary disorientation in men confronted with violence and murder, the residues of slavery and the desire of former victims to become exploiters in their turn, 'as

though the oppressed convention nurses identical expectations of achieving power²⁴ and entails the continuing exploitation of minority or eclipsed groups. They take place in less remote and therefore more easily recognizable communities. *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961) focuses on a master-servant covenant which turns into a conflict on an East Indian rice-plantation between the savannahs and the coast. Here it is Oudin's illiterate wife, nevertheless capable of reading the constraints of the bond between Oudin and the moneylender Ram, who becomes an agent of change. In *The Whole Armour* (1962), which takes place on a precarious strip of land between bush and sea, Cristo, a young man wrongly accused of murder, agrees to sacrifice himself to atone for the violence and guilt of his community. In *The Secret Ladder* (1963) the land surveyor Fenwick and his crew stationed in the jungle gauge the river Canje prior to the building of a dam that will flood the territory from which the descendants of runaway slaves refuse to move.

Each novel is open-ended, presenting an opportunity for change rather than actual transformation. The emphasis is on imaginative and spiritual freedom as well as on a sense of responsibility, arising from the recognition of an alien and weak element in the community as its true roots and springhead of change. The crux of each novel lies in the possibility of unlocking a fixed order of things and eroding the certainties and imperatives that imprison the protagonists within a rigid sense of self. Hence the crumbling rather than 'consolidation' of personality, the disturbing resemblances between dead and living characters or the reappearance of the dead among the living, and the frequency of doubles or twins to 'break through from patterns of implacable identities'. In keeping with Harris's emphasis on process rather than achievement, the end of the *Quartet* is inconclusive. A central motif running through the four movements is the need for the Guyanese, as for Donne, 'to understand and transform [their] beginnings', though the 'mystery of origins' can only be partly penetrated by 'dismantling a prison of appearance', a course of action initiated in the *Quartet* and pursued in the following novels.

In *Heartland* (1964), an essential link between the *Guyana Quartet* and Harris's next works, the protagonist, Stevenson, comes to the interior as a watchman and meets three characters who had vanished from ordinary life in the *Quartet* and make him aware in their various ways of the significance of the jungle. At the end of the novel Stevenson too disappears into the heartland, leaving fragments of letters and poems in his half-burnt resthouse. The uncertainty of his fate in the life-and-death world of the jungle suggests that, like other characters in the later novels, he loses himself in the third nameless dimension Harris explores. This is the void once inherent in the Caribbean psyche, seen now as a possible vessel of rebirth and as a state to be experienced by the artist who shuns the tyranny of one dominant world-view and allows contradictory voices to speak through him. While the omnipresent jungle is here evoked in its impressive material density, the narrative nevertheless adumbrates the interiorization of action characteristic of Harris's next four or five novels. Through Stevenson's relationship with the Amerindian woman, Petra, the pattern of pursuit and flight specific to the *Quartet* gives way momentarily

to reciprocity between the exploring consciousness and the eclipsed 'other'. Petra runs away all the same after he has helped her give birth to her child, and as he tries to overcome his sense of frustration, Stevenson realizes that she has seen through him and eluded his possessiveness. He is last seen following

the crumbling black road ...[which] was but an endless wary flood broken into retiring trenches or advancing columns, all moving still towards fashioning a genuine medium of conquest ...

in which 'crumbling', 'retiring' and 'advancing' outline the course henceforth taken by Harris's characters, namely an erosion of biased assumptions associated with a double movement backwards and forwards which precludes total identification with another and therefore total loss or gain for one or the other. The 'vicarious hollow and original substance' (cf. the 'substance of life' in *Palace*) towards which Stevenson moves but is not shown reaching (since complete liberation from the 'prison-house of subsistence' is impossible) sums up the condition of apparent nothingness yet possible source of creation that Harris sees as intrinsic to Caribbean experience and art.

A conceptual image akin to Keats's 'negative capability', 'vicarious hollow' also applies to both characterization and authorship in Harris's fiction. Increasingly, the protagonist in his later novels appears as a medium who allows other existences, 'agents of personality',⁵ to take part in the 'drama of consciousness' that re-enacts itself in his psyche. This attempt to replace a monadic personality by a 'multiplicity' or 'community' of being led Harris in later novels to present himself as the 'editor' of the living texts of his characters' experience, thus also as a vessel at one remove from the protagonist. The omniscient narrator of traditional realistic fiction but also the I-narrator of more subjective narratives (experimental or not) give way to a narrator-editor who scans material that comes alive through him, frequently of its own volition. Harris's mode of writing consists in a complex, multi-faceted and non-linear quest which combines a revision of the past, of the protagonist's vision and behaviour, and of the writing process itself. This is why his novels are so many instalments ('infinite rehearsal') in what he calls 'the unfinished genesis of the imagination'.

The 'infinite rehearsal' is already intimated, if not yet conceptualized, in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965) when the I-narrator describes the re-creation of experience in which he is involved:

I find myself conferring the curious baptism of imagination upon helpless relics.... (15)

It was to prove the re-living of all my life again and again as if I were a ghost returning to the same place (which was always different), shoring up different ruins (which were always the same). (25)

There are similar features in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* and the next three novels. They all recreate the past of an individual Guyanese family, whose former trials and present circumstances are part of the 'burden of history' that still weighs on Guyanese society. The condition explored in each novel is one of

void or loss. The Narrator in *The Eye*, which evokes the economic depression of the twenties and the Guiana strike in 1948, suffers from 'a void in conventional memory' as a result of an accident. In *The Waiting Room* (1967) Susan Forrestal, deserted by her lover and blind after four eye-operations, finds herself in a physical and psychological void. She and her husband died in an explosion, and the substance of the novel is drawn from their half-obliterated log-book and 'edited' by the author. Prudence, the protagonist of *Tumatumari* (1968) goes through a nervous breakdown after the death of her husband and the delivery of her stillborn child. In *Ascent to Omai* (1970) Victor who feels 'on the threshold of breakdown or collapse', explores the heartland in search of his lost father who disappeared after serving a sentence for setting fire to the factory in which he was working.

In these four novels the parallel involvement in a search for the lost in whatever form and the kind of fiction that the protagonist, narrator and/or artist attempts to conceive becomes more obvious. The Narrator in *The Eye* who re-lives his past, Susan and her lover re-living their affair, Prudence recreating her family's and twentieth-century Guyanese history from her memories and her father's papers, and Victor writing a novel about his father's trial, are in search of a 'primordial species of fiction',⁶ exploring a level of existence far beyond their social life, and which they had ignored, neglected or misrepresented to themselves. In *Palace of the Peacock*, as Donne hangs from the cliff, the victimized folk appear to him in the veil of the waterfall through images of an Arawak Christ, then Virgin and child, i.e. naked but also sacred figures of poverty who seem to arise from his own unconscious. In the novels published between 1965 and 1970 the primordial and the sacred are always a suppressed but close 'other': the Narrator's closest friend in *The Eye*, his relatives and a prostitute in the interior whom he unwittingly made use of, as well as those he calls the 'uninitiate' or the 'unborn', the eclipsed victims of conscious or unconscious exploiters; in *The Waiting Room* each lover in relation to the other; in *Tumatumari* the Amerindians and Prudence's black brother; and in *Ascent to Omai* Victor's father, the faceless destitute miner who fades into the jungle, giving Victor the impression that he is a *tabula rasa*. As each explorer discovers, however, the nothingness, deadness, stagnation or even inflexibility of these deprived individuals or groups, of the vanished past as of lost cultures are only apparent, for as Harris was to explain, they belong to 'areas of tradition that have sunken away and apparently disappeared and vanished and yet that are still active at some level'.⁷ This subterranean living tradition, called elsewhere 'the absent body', 'absence-within-presence', and 'living fossil texts of reality', takes on innumerable faces or shapes in his fiction as it is intuitively apprehended by the protagonist who allows the past to arise from his or the collective unconscious and to come alive in his consciousness. The dreaming recreation of the New World conquest in *Palace* is a surfacing of that tradition into consciousness, as are the Caribs Cristo encounters in *The Whole Armour*, the Indians in *Tumatumari* or the pre-Columbian vestiges into which Idiot Nameless falls in *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975). The recovery of this lost tradition is what Harris means by searching for a 'primordial species of

fiction'. Starting from West Indian deprivation, he nevertheless insists on the area's creative potentialities when he refers to 'the capacity of the abyss to secrete ... "re-visionary potential within texts and imageries of reality"'⁸

The starting-point of the characters' exploration is nature and/or society (even when reduced to bare essentials as in *the Waiting Room*), for it is always the concrete world which offers the possibility to perceive *through* and *beyond* to an immaterial dimension or those who are deemed immaterial ('the nameless sleeping living and the nameless forgotten dead'). Here the protagonists' disorientation is not a major state in their quest but their condition when the novels open. Their breakdown, however, turns out to be an asset: in their initial state of weakness or emptiness, they no longer confine their past experience or the relationships they evoke within a narrow or one-sided view. Each becomes a medium ('vicarious hollow') in which the past re-enacts itself. In both *The Eye* and *The Waiting Room* the narrator's declared purpose is to allow 'a free construction of events' to emerge from the evocation of the past.⁹ The 'broken' memory or the unsettled state of the characters yields a fragmented vision of events which gradually reveal possibilities of interpretation different from their original one. In other words, the past is subject to the same process of crumbling and reshaping as the character who re-lives it and who can therefore envisage a new approach to its consequences. Nor are time and space (outer and inner) rigid and divisive frames of existence; these barriers come apart too, disclosing the disregarded or unsuspected feelings of individuals and peoples, whose behaviour had been represented in one light only. There is a dislocation of the surface reality in all its forms (what is now called 'deconstruction', though with a different purpose) as well as a fragmentation of the narrative structure, which make the protagonist aware of 'the stranger animation one sees within the cycle of time': in nature; in the seemingly frozen past; in the retrenched and silent existence of the uninitiate and in the protagonists' own unconscious. This multi-layered fragmentation opens the way to what is apparently dead within and beyond the visible world but becomes perceptible as alien, mysterious life, what Harris was to call 'the *inimitable* ground of being',¹⁰ sometimes fierce destructive force, sometimes frail indistinct spirit, but never an idealized totality. The protagonist recovers or progresses to the extent that he can *feel* that alien life by incurring its 'burden of authenticity, obscurity or difficulty'.¹¹

The characters' transformation ('trial' and 'gestation of the soul') is rendered through serial metamorphoses of metaphors or 'convertible images', originally images of a terrifying past in the West Indian consciousness. The scarecrow in *The Eye* is an image for the Narrator's victimized double, for disintegrating tenements in Guyana and for the dying British Empire, as well as, more generally, for the diminished state of man in society and for disruptions observable in nature. This multiple metaphor (like the many versions of the severed head in *Tumatumari*) provides many ways of approaching the 'unfathomable whole' that belies the void or *tabula rasa*, but it is perceived intuitively only in rare, privileged moments of vision. In the process of their conversion the protagonists shed their sense of an obdurate identity as they move towards

'Idiot Nameless', the identityless trickster of Caribbean history. The scarecrow, at first an image of unconsciousness, is released like the Narrator from the blindness of self-sufficiency and becomes the medium of an interplay of opposites, the foundation of true vision; the waiting-room, where Susan broods over the past and suffers, becomes a 'womb' of rebirth; the severed head in *Tumatumari* turns into a smiling and flowering Gorgon's head; in *Ascent to Omai* the stone which sends out concentric rings in a pool, also horizons of memory delimiting frustrating periods in Victor's life, initiates a dance between these blocked slices of life. There is no final resolution but a metaphorical vision of the way ahead.

Between *Ascent* and *Black Marsden* (1972) Harris published two volumes of stories, *The Sleepers of Roraima* (1970) and *The Age of the Rainmakers* (1971), reinterpretations of Amerindian myths, vestiges of legend or historical incidents, which throw light on the distinction he makes between historiography as authoritarian consensus of opinion and myth, which can 'breach the mimicry of natural fact'.¹² Though dealing with specifically Amerindian experience, they are an essential link between his earlier and later fiction by realizing his concept of cross-culturalism, particularly in 'Yurokon', which fictionalizes the effect on the last surviving Carib child of his ancestors' bone-flute, the instrument they carved from their cannibalized Spanish enemies after eating a morsel of their flesh to assimilate their spirit and intuit the kind of attack they might wage against themselves. The Caribs also saw in the bone-flute the very origins of music. Through the bone-flute metaphor Harris expresses his conviction that 'adversarial contexts' (the encounter between inimical cultures) can generate creativity since destruction (cannibalism) and creation (music) coalesce in the instrument, whose very name suggests the 'mutual spaces' shared by enemies.

Though his next novels are also informed by an inner movement towards 'Otherness', Harris warns in *Black Marsden* against the danger of erecting former victims into the instrument of a new tyranny in the name of a misconceived revolution. Goodrich, the main character, sees that exploited workers have been trapped into a spiral of destructive strikes by their employers and by obscure forces they don't understand. He himself has been stimulated to generosity and spiritual liberation by *Black Marsden* and the agents of his *tabula rasa* theatre (a development from *Ascent*). *Marsden*, however, threatens to engulf and 'deplete' Goodrich who eventually resists his hypnotic spell though still moved by the 'strange inner fire' *Marsden* originally lit in him. The novel takes place in Edinburgh but, like all Harris's subsequent novels, bridges continents. The bridge metaphor, so frequent in his writing, is another multi-levelled image which conveys the characters' actual and/or imaginative travelling from the UK to the Americas or India (see *The Angel at the Gate* [1982]) as well as the ceaselessly elaborated crossing between the unconscious and what Harris calls 'the miracle of consciousness'. The spirit of the place is superbly rendered in this as in the next novels, *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), a sequel to *Black Marsden*, which takes place in Mexico, and the so-called London novels, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* and *Genesis*

of the Clowns (published in one volume, 1977), *The Tree of the Sun* (1978) and *The Angel at the Gate*. In *Genesis* Frank Wellington briefly evokes London, then travels back in memory to Guyana and enters into a new dialogue with those he had unconsciously exploited in the past. The death of the Empire and the reversal in his outlook are played out in a 'Copernican revolution' as his former crew become 'the shadowplay of a genesis of suns ... interior suns around which I now turned whereas before they had turned around me in processional sentiment' (86). Such 'convertible images' weave the fabric of the fiction Harris called 'the novel as painting' in the seventies. In *Companions* Goodrich edits the diary, paintings and sculptures of Nameless, the protagonist, who has 'fallen' through layers of vestiges in Mexico City and discovered in them 'unsuspected corridors, underseas, underskies, of creation' (32). In *Da Silva da Silva* and *The Tree of the Sun* Da Silva (reborn from *Palace* and *Heartland*) is a painter who, as he prepares his canvases for an exhibition, is urged to a profound re-vision of his paintings and the experiences they call to mind. Though the characters' lives are drawn with increased sensuousness, the Da Silva novels are more specifically about the nature of creativity and evince the self-reflexiveness (already present in *The Eye*) more characteristic of the recent novels. In *The Tree of the Sun* the Da Silvas come across an unfinished book and letters the former tenants of their flat secretly wrote to each other but never sent. Da Silva's editorship of this material is the subject of the novel and of his own paintings. Not only does he bring the dead tenants to life, they bring him to life in their writing and envision the role he plays in their future existence. In this dialogue between the dead and the living and their awareness of each other across different time-scales, as well as outer and inner space, lies the way to 'the resurrection of the self', the return to life of buried antecedents or the surfacing and assimilation of unconscious elements by the consensuous.

Ever since *Palace of the Peacock* resurrection has been an increasingly dense and multi-layered phenomenon in Harris's fiction. At first, it meant the resurgence of Guyana's suppressed history, the voices of the dead speaking and re-living their terrifying ordeals in the narrator's consciousness. As the end of *Palace* makes it clear, Harris associated from the start the victims of those ordeals with the sacred. But though often metaphorized in Christ, the resurrection does not appear as a miracle performed by an all-powerful God, for God too is 'multi-dimensional'.¹³ Though in a sense a sacrament, it seems rather to be part of Harris's conception of the life-and-death process, the surfacing of areas of 'non-being' or 'absence' into 'being' or 'presence', of a living tradition which nevertheless remains partly in limbo. In the *Carnival* trilogy resurrection is the return to life of those guides whose post-mortem double vision and past experience of evil as victims, but also victimizers, enable them to help the voyager in his quest and recreation of the past. I am referring to Masters in *Carnival* (1985), Faust in *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and Canaima, the god of vengeance, in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990). The resurrection is also a partial manifestation of the 'unfathomable wholeness' never entirely perceptible. Clearly then, it is part of the creative

process itself, in Harris's terms, 'the genesis of art' or 'a dialogue with the sacred', though the victims it represents are never idealized in his fiction. The trilogy offers numerous examples of the evil from which no people or culture is exempt, of the 'daemons and furies' who, as much as gentle and generous figures, can stimulate the voyager to a deeper understanding and self-knowledge, as Anselm is urged by Canaima to revise his own and his family's past in *Four Banks*.

Although *Carnival* takes place partly in London, the trilogy as a whole marks Harris's return to Guyanese material, as does his latest novel *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (1993). The complex, multiple 'carnival' metaphor in the first of these novels naturally belongs to West Indian iconography and expresses through Jonathan Weyl's narrative and experience in colonial Guiana Harris's double vision of history, of existence as interplay of adversarial forces, and his conception of creativity and of fiction as a 'double writing' that develops through the penetration of masks. The trilogy revises major genres in Western literature (allegory, drama, epic) bringing to light reversals of what may appear as implacable fate, or conversions of deprivation and/or static conditions. *Carnival* is a 'divine comedy of existence' which shows the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso of Dante's time to have become inadequate categories which are being transformed into fluid, overlapping states. Man's incorrigible desire for an absolute (which Dante reached) is also what led to world conquest and divisions into higher and lower cultures. This is further shown in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, the 'spiritual autobiography' of Robin Redbreast Glass, in whom the temptations of Faust (and Quetzalcoatl) are played against the promptings of dumb Ghost and his creative conscience, the 'numinous scarecrow' arising from the ocean in the 'global theatre of mankind', where so many victims (and countless refugees) of perverted idealism have drowned in the past or have been and still are precipitated through many twentieth-century catastrophes. Here too the narrative grows out of a voyage backwards and forwards on a scale of infinity (the past within the present opening on to a future temporarily set at 2025) in search of the unfinished thread of creation.

That thread runs through the coat of tradition that Penelope keeps weaving and unravelling in *Four Banks*. In this novel the major elements of Harris's later fiction coalesce with his characteristic blend of terseness and depth: they involve a return to the primitive roots of civilization and a rebirth of so-called 'savage' people(s) counterbalanced by an awareness of parallel or alternative worlds and their potentialities, inspired by the Quantum theory, thus spanning the history of mankind from its remote past into the future; the rewriting of analogous Guyanese and Greek myths – in particular Canaima's and Ulysses' adventures – which underpin the whole trilogy and reach a climax with the hero's forgiving rather than vengeful homecoming; above all, an approach to the mystery of creation and the equally mysterious source of language, evoked through a dazzling rendering of earthly nature and its correspondences in the cosmos.¹⁴

The simultaneous evocation of a planetary setting and a small poverty-ridden settlement in the Guyanese interior, Sorrow Hill in the area of the

Camaria falls (both a major locale in *Palace* and *Heartland*), also features in Harris's latest novel, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*. Their personal conflicts and the world's crises are 'rehearsed' by the inmates of the Sorrow Hill 'asylum for the greats' (whose masks the patients don in their spells of madness), formerly an actual penal settlement. From being a prison in colonial times, the area (and our planet) has been turned into an asylum. Hope, a half-time patient who suffers from a breakdown, analyses the nature and possibilities of breakthrough and resurrection in his book of legend and the Nameless theatre. In his philosophical, dialectical exchanges with the other patients and their impersonations or masks of historical and religious 'greats', he evinces the fusion of abstract discussion and metaphorical, sensuously evocative prose characteristic of Harris's recent fiction. Hope's perception of the resurrection ranges from a metaphysical and religious experience of the possible rebirth of conscience and of civilization to his actual love-making with Butterfly when their 'bodies [arise] ... from the grave of history' (37). While on the personal level the major confrontation is between Hope and self-divided Christopher D'eath, his rival and murderer, the central historical event remains the conquest of the Americas and its consequences to the present day. Harris does not merely propose a re-vision of that event and its catastrophic conversion into a quest for power and gold (Sorrow Hill is a diamond-and gold-mining centre). His once-more-unfinished play and inconclusive 'rehearsals' probe into the evolutionary nature of man and its history, and into the related phenomenal, animal layers of being which man ignores at his peril. He advocates a new 'phenomenal literacy' as Hope travels in a corial (a small wooden boat) towards the Camaria rapids 'to explore the descent of populations all around the globe into the maelstrom' (59) and engages in a dialogue with the animated landscape:

The hollowed tree in which Hope rode was equally a memorial of the vanished wing of a bird that once nested in it, the scale of a fish that once dived in the river reflecting the tree, the animal that once made its home in the cave of the tree. (47)

in the wake of their climax Butterfly had gained her constellation thighs from the horns of new moon deer in broad daylight that D'eath had shot. All were compressed signals of a theatre of expedition inscribed everywhere into particles of dust, cloud, sunrise, noon, sunset ... everywhere ... Hope was now approaching Serpent creek ... (48)

NOTES

1. *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 146. All subsequent novels by Harris are published by Faber.
2. 'Behring Straits', in *Eternity to Season* (first published 1954; rpt London: New Beacon, 1978), p. 13.
3. *The Guyana Quartet*, rpt in one volume with minor changes and 'A note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*' (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 9.
4. Wilson Harris, 'The Making of Tradition', in Alastair Niven (ed.), *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas, Themes of exile and expatriation* (Brussels: Didier, 1976), p. 35. Essay rpt in *Explorations*.

5. Interview with Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander, in *Kas-Kas, Interviews with three Caribbean writers in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1972), p. 52.
6. *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967; rpt 1973), p. 48.
7. Interview with Stephen Slemon, *Ariel*, 19, 3, (July 1988), 48.
8. Wilson Harris, 'The Fabric of the Imagination', *Third World Quarterly*, 12, 1 (January 1990), 178.
9. *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, p. 13.
10. *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 51.
11. *Ascent to Omai*, p. 96.
12. Wilson Harris, *Explorations, A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 101.
13. *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 29.
14. To understand the development of Harris's thought on these subjects and their relation to this conception of fiction, see Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, ed. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège: L3, Liège, Language and Literature, 1992). See also Wilson Harris and the *Uncompromising Imagination*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1991), a collection of essays covering all the novels except *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*. It includes an updated bibliography.