

**“Immanent Substance”: Reflections on the Creative Process in
Wilson Harris’s *The Infinite Rehearsal***

by Hena Maes-Jelinek

That the life of the imagination has its roots in spaces and elements beyond historical bias or man-made formula or conventional memory is an illumination of a creative fusion of ‘absences’ and ‘presences’.

(Wilson Harris, Unpublished Afterword to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*)

[A]esthetic inventions are ‘archaic’. They carry in them the pulse of the distant source.

(George Steiner, *Real Presences*)

From his earliest writings Wilson Harris has been obsessed with the nature of creation, the act of bringing into being, and the capacity to do so, though the two often blend in his comments, as suggested in his expression “acts of creation-in-creativity.”⁸⁵ The title of his collection of poetry *Eternity to Season* already epitomises his conception of the creative process: the passage from an endless source of being to seasonal transitional forms. As we shall see, however, “Eternity” in no way suggests a static immortality, while the subtitle of the 1954 edition,⁸⁶ “poems of separation and reunion” points to the movement which informs the creative process. Moreover, as the poem “The Well (prologues of creation)” shows, the source of creation is subterranean not heavenly:

Who brings the water
From the deep interior of earth
Is magical with the science
Of vision
Is the godlike being of the well.⁸⁷

In his introduction to the 1954 edition of the poems A.J.Seymour rightly calls *Eternity to Season* “The Book of Genesis according to Harris.” Indeed, while the collection as a whole evokes various facets of creation including the very beginning of Guyanese history (“Behring Straits”) and the archetypal links between the new world and the old through the reincarnation of Homeric characters, “The Fabulous Well” section deals more specifically with the creation of life and the “re-

creation of the senses” which, as we shall see, is also a major feature given further meaning in *The Infinite Rehearsal*.⁸⁸

In his many comments on the nature and function of the imagination and on his writing method Harris explains that the printed text of his fictions takes shape after his hard concentration on earlier versions in which he discovers “clues” he was not aware of having planted there, signals of the text’s livingness and intentionality as it takes precedence over his [the author’s] directing will. In a sense he abandons himself to, goes to meet, these manifestations of the “fabulous well” as he re-works the imageries that first arose from it.⁸⁹ Obviously, this suggests far more than a mere conscious development of imageries since it implies that life and the “texts” enacting it evince a creative genius that exceeds the limitations of individual man. One should add that in his comments on the working of the imagination Harris seems less concerned with explaining his own work than with throwing light on what he considers as the deep-seated germ of creation as opposed to non-essentialist views of fiction writing.

No theory or exegesis has ever been able to account rationally for the creative genius of man. Even in the age of reason Pope wrote that “Both [writers and critics] must alike from Heaven derive their light”.⁹⁰ And as suggested in the introductory chapter of a fairly recent history of genius, “no amount of analysis has yet been able to explain the capacities of those rare individuals who can produce creative work of lasting quality and value.”⁹¹ Hence the difficulty of tracing what would appear as a “logical” explanation of the writer’s progression towards the printed, in Harris’s case always “unfinished,” version. As one examines the successive drafts of his novels,⁹² one is struck by inexplicable gaps in the creative continuum, especially between the last typescript and the published novel. Harris himself has commented on such gaps in relation to *Carnival* by writing that “the final draft took place in head and heart and mind and was transferred immediately onto the page. The evidence for such changes needs to be gauged within the rhythms of the inner life of the text. Nevertheless - whatever hiatuses . . . may exist – the roots of re-visionary procedure I describe in this Note are visible in the series of drafts.”⁹³ Another striking feature is the relative explicitness of the early drafts both in plot and the expression of Harris’s philosophy of life, which makes perhaps the more mysterious the creative thrust inducing the mutation to the appropriate, at once more elliptical and pregnant, form of his fiction. This mutation is a major aspect of the protagonist’s progress *through* and *beyond* the actual circumstances of life in search of meaning and value.⁹⁴ To give

one example of meaningful reduction in Harris's printed text: the holograph material of 261 pages of *The Infinite Rehearsal*, including six notebooks, was finally reduced to the 88-page novel. The introductory note to the novel (much longer in the typescript) appears only on p.106 in the second holograph notebook. This is followed by an explanatory note by W.H., which has disappeared from the published text, though W.H. remains a character in it. The effect of these reduction and cancellation is to enhance the significance of the Note by Robin Redbreast Glass, the protagonist and narrator, for, as a result, it brings out more forcefully the important fact that his "fictional autobiography" (1) is that of a dead man, while it also presents in a nutshell the "immanent substance" of the novel.

All Harris's fictions are in a sense a continuously renewed dialogue between the living and the dead or the eclipsed, whether people(s), cultures or civilisations. In order to understand this, one must keep in mind that Harris perceives existence as an endless interweaving between life and death; that death never means to him total or final annihilation but a living absence, "a deposit of ghosts relating to the conquistadorial body" (1); that the realm of the dead is also that of the sacred and of the subterranean tradition which Harris and his characters ceaselessly probe in their quest for value or, as Glass puts it, "the original nature of value and spirit" (vii). That realm is also the unconscious and, approached in a different perspective, the void experienced by the pre-Columbian and, subsequently, the Amerindian and Afro-Caribbean people(s), an apparent void only, which is also the source of Harris's fictional vision, its metaphysical and ontological tenor.⁹⁵ This implies that no parcel of human experience is ever lost. It is transmuted into the ghostly substance plumbed by Harris's protagonists to recognize it as both part of their inner being and of the substratum out of which spirit takes shape, a substratum from which it cannot be severed without entailing *illiteracies of the heart and mind* (27, see also below).⁹⁶ However, not *Carnival* alone but many a Harrisian narrative can be called "a divine comedy of existence." They are Dantesque journeys to the kingdom of the dead and the eclipsed. With a major difference, namely that the creative journey in Harris's opus is, as already suggested, a two-way process, an encounter between the questing protagonist and the fictional substance which, as he has often explained in his essays,⁹⁷ erupts of its own accord from the unconscious, an arousal alternately called "resurrection." Such is the basic creative movement in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, as is immediately clear at the beginning of the novel, when Ghost (IT or "spectre of

wholeness," [2]) arises from the sea as personification of the erupting immanent fictional substance to meet Robin Glass on a beach in Old New Forest (1).⁹⁸ Or, expressed differently, Ghost is "the apparition of the numinous scarecrow, the numinous victim who (or is it which?) secretes himself, herself, itself in our dreams" (1). One should note that in the holograph draft W.H. expresses his intention of writing Robin's autobiography, whereas in the revised version Robin is the major narrator in spite of his assertion that W.H. has "stolen a march upon [him]" (vii). It is his authorship which illustrates the intentionality of the living text.⁹⁹

Just as Harris disclaims the full authorship of the novel, so Robin Redbreast Glass is not the single author of his fictional autobiography. If he were, there might be little difference from the self-sufficient author of realistic fiction. As Ghost tells him, "bits of the world's turbulence, universal unconscious embed themselves in your book" (46), while in the holograph draft Ghost says: "You live and write from the other side of W.H.'s mind. He is indeed a character in your book. It is you who break the authoritarian script to which he may otherwise be prone."¹⁰⁰ In this respect, Harris's successive novels have moved towards the gradual effacement of the third-person author/narrator (already partly true in *Palace of the Peacock*) who, in the later novels, becomes the "editor" of other people's Dreambook, Anselm's in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, Hope's in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* and Bone's in *Jonestown*. In *The Infinite Rehearsal* the "immanent substance" moulds itself, as it were, into several creative masks, Robin's, Ghost's and W.H.'s as well as in the partial masks Faust wears. They form a creative pool or, to use Harris's own words, they create through "mutual agency."¹⁰¹ The shaping of fiction into a diversity of creative masks informs the narrative movement, which reverses and complements that of *Carnival* modulated by a penetration of masks. Nevertheless, in *Carnival* too "fiction gestates."¹⁰²

Mutual agency in no way means consensual co-writing. Robin warns in his Note that he and W.H. are adversaries, which appears most clearly in chapter six of the novel when Robin recalls (or thinks he remembers) that he was in bed with flu when his mother Alice, his aunt Miriam and three children drowned as their boat, *Tiger*, capsized. Only his friends Peter and Emma were saved by Alice who had returned to the sea to save other children but failed. The first bone of contention is when W.H. challenges this version of events, asserting that **he** was in bed with flu while Robin drowned. This is not the only source of uncertainty for, like Donne in *Palace of the Peacock*, Robin dies

several deaths, one by drowning, and his "second death" in his revised "dreaming" existence when he is beheaded by Ulysses Frog (11), the prelude to his new life of exploring consciousness and the potential rebirth of his age. The frequent uncertainty of facts in Harris's fiction points to the difficulty if not impossibility of ever knowing the complete truth, especially historical truth. The other reason for Robin's animosity towards W.H. is authorial rivalry since at that stage he (Robin) claims the right to be the sole author of his autobiography ("It is *my* life – not W.H.'s," 47). Actually, he loathes both W.H. and Ghost, holding the latter responsible for the terror he experiences as he falls back into a discordant hollow age and resenting the "uncomfortable home truths"(49) spoken by Ghost, fearing also the dissolution of the ego obvious in Ghost's aged appearance and death-like being. He nevertheless admits that "Such is the illusion of power the resurrected body faces as it ascends from the grave. It is encrusted with illusions of power, illusions of freedom, that it needs to unravel as a prelude to a genuine revolution" (49). Thus the "adversarial spirit" in which, Ghost says, the truths of fiction are rooted (46) also prevails at the deeper level of gestating consciousness in Robin's book, informing the dialectical process, the confrontation and tension between partial truths which, Harris suggests, kindle creativity.¹⁰³ This deeper level of creativity is one reason why Harris rejects realism. Moreover, the fluid interplay of authorial presences as various creative masks emerging then fading again in Robin's book imparts its structural movement, a musical rhythm as it were, to the narrative as a whole. At the beginning he refers to "all masks and vessels in which a spark of ultimate recognition flashed . . . faded . . . flashed again" (2). This oscillation informs all aspects of Robin's progression, the shifts between inner and outer being, between the two time scales (see below), between remembering and forgetting. It is clearly a major feature in Harris's philosophy of being which destabilizes temptations to immutability.

As already obvious, Robin's autobiography is of the creative spirit. In the complex density of the first chapter one can trace some of the basic features through which he engages simultaneously in an allegory of modern times and the imaginative self-reflexive journey that might enable him to envision a reversal and transmutation of the destructive course of contemporary civilisation. His surname, Glass, suggests reflection in a mirror and transparency (at one stage he is in a looking-glass world). He presents himself as a "gravedigger in a library of dreams and a pork-knocker in the sacred wood" (2), a description that combines his exploration of a multiplicity of texts with his search for

the treasures of the earth.¹⁰⁴ As Robin Redbreast he sees in Quetzalcoatl a “savage antecedent” (6), at once the animal and divine in man, extra-human dimensions at unconscious or archetypal level that we tend to ignore. The animal dimension is also manifest in Don Juan Ulysses Frog, the composite mythical immigration officer, a bureaucrat who attempts to catch Ghost, dumb at this stage like “the constellation of a deprived humanity” (3), foreshadowing all the refugees Robin Glass will come across in his pilgrimage.

The rich intertextuality of chapter one brings to light the subterranean cross-culturality that is an essential feature of Robin’s fiction writing. The sacred wood, a source of terror and regeneration for both Dante and T.S.Eliot, and the latter’s metaphor for the realm of poetry and criticism was, first of all, the grove where Aeneas plucked the Golden Bough before his journey to the world of the dead.¹⁰⁵ Even before starting off, Robin hopes for a “chance to consume with Ghost a splinter of transubstantial creation in every chapel perilous of the heights and the depths (4/11). Jessie Weston, who traced the ruins of an ancient ritual in the Grail romances,¹⁰⁶ sees the Perilous Chapel in the middle of a forest as the seat of a terrifying trial before reaching the source of spiritual life. Other sub-texts imply that, like his Aunt Miriam in the plays she used to stage (35), Robin is engaged in a re-vision of history (7, 8) and becomes aware of the ambivalent consequences of historical events: the emancipation of slaves leaving them homeless; the First World War doing away with privileges but sending thousands to their death evoked in lines from Wilfred Owen’s darkly ironic poem “*Dulce et Decorum Est*”; Chamberlain’s “*peace in our time*” raising the axe that fell upon the globe in 1939. Slavery impinges on Robin’s consciousness through the calypso “Stone Cold Dead in the Market” (Harris calls it “Jumbi Jamboree”¹⁰⁷) sung by Ulysses Frog’s mistress, herself called Calypso (10,11). Yeats’s “Second Coming” underlies the “resurrection” from the waves” (8) of Ghost, who seems at first to voice “waste land poetry” (3), and later Emma adapts a line from *The Four Quartets* when she tells Robin that returning to ourselves, we “know ourselves for the first bleak and terrible time” (58). These and other literary and mythical allusions¹⁰⁸ intersperse the fabric of Robin’s autobiography, eliciting connections between central American and European myths (Quetzalcoatl and Faust) and weaving the historical background of an apparently doomed civilisation. Night keeps falling through the first chapter, intimating the urgency of Ghost’s apparition and Robin’s “impossible [yet necessary] quest for wholeness” (1).

Faust, the play revised by Robin's pork-knocker grandfather during his last voyage in the heartland, is the major text subjacent to Robin's quest, to which he already responded as a foetus in his mother's womb while she was typing it. Aware of his grandson's coming birth and at first prepared to barter his own soul and his grandson's head for "crass gold" (14), his grandfather had begun instead "to prize the ironies of strangest hidden conscience" (15) thus foreshadowing Robin's commitment. In other words, the conversion of the grandfather's quest from material to spiritual wealth¹⁰⁹ originates in the intuitive "pre-natal" dialogue between grandfather and grandson, a dialectical complicity between past and future which later also stimulates Robin "to plumb the rebirth of [his] age" (15). The grandfather was obsessed with both Goethe's and Marlowe's protagonist, and Faust and Dr Faustus appear alternately in Robin's narrative. Like Ulysses Frog, "epic lover yet doomed jealous scavenger of humanity" (12), Faust is an ambivalent archetype: "Faust the Beast. Faust the half-circus man, the half-mechanical soul. Faust the womb and the grave. Faust the slave and Faust the self-mocking engineer of the gods . . ." (11). As both tempter and guide, he provokes in Robin the awakening of his critical imagination and the capacity to discriminate between "LIKE AND UNLIKE FORCES" (23), a recurring necessity as Harris's protagonists face apparently similar compartments with totally different motivations and consequences,¹¹⁰ as they learn to see *through* and *beyond* deceptive appearances, and repeatedly make moral choices on which their progress depends. This is illustrated in Robin's recreation of his awakening senses, which shows a similar though far more complex conceptualisation than in *Eternity to Season*.

Robin was born in 1945 when the Bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "an effulgence of birth threaded into death" (17). As he dreams his birth, he is struck by the silence ensuing on the fall of the Bomb yet also by his own instinct to seize all silent creatures, his temptation "to seize the species, seize the kingdoms of the earth" (20). He fails in his attempt to seize the world but the moment of temptation and his yielding to it enable him to *hear* the bustle of life as it slips from his grasp. He also detects the deception Faust is playing on him with his simulated kingdom bell and, overcoming his numbness, he manages to touch him instead of being touched, "caught" by him and made an instrument of material progress (22-23). This free and challenging gesture enables Robin to acquire his own voice and to scream, "giving voice to a spirit through and beyond [himself]" (24).

Indeed, he realises that the cry he “gave from the heart, [was] a cry so poignant, so real, it drew [him] into the web, the flesh, the imperilled substance, of all ecstatic and sorrowing creatures” (24). Thus Robin’s reactions to Faust’s temptations bring about the re-creation of his senses and sensibility as he counters passivity and indifference and breaks “the silence and deafness” which, Ghost had warned him, “would encompass [his] age if [he] failed to sound the origins of spirit” (19). Ironically, Robin’s participation in the “ceaseless rehearsal of the birth of spirit” (18) occurs through his confrontation with Faust who calls himself “the comedian of the void in the machine” (25). It is an essential aspect of what Harris calls “paradoxes of creativity”¹¹ that only a penetration into and reversal of the material world can reveal the hidden spirit accessible *through* it. This is called “ironies of Faust” in the typescript.¹² Faust, the master of a technological world, nevertheless tells Robin “Your voice is revolutionary spirit” (25), thus showing his awareness of the “*mystery* of deprivation and its bearing on caught yet liberated senses of the imagination” (25).

“THE MYSTERY OF DEPRIVATION” (26) becomes a key phrase in Robin’s evocation of two childhood events which bring home to him the crucial significance of the “origins of sensation” (34). The first event is the Guyana strike of 1948 already visualised, though differently, in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* where the narrator remembers “those who shot up, prematurely, with a conviction of self-righteous organization, and died before they knew it in the battle of the year, strike and lock-out.”¹³ In the earlier novel, the emphasis was on a misconception of freedom which, Harris seems to imply, was to influence Guyana’s political future. At a deeper level of consciousness, Robin’s memory of Tiger, a band leader and striker shot by the police, makes him relate the strikers’ “real” deprivation, as well as their sublimation of it into self-righteous protest and “purity” (30),¹⁴ to a deprivation of the senses, which Aunt Miriam calls “*illiteracies of the heart and mind*” (27). He writes:

Aunt Miriam was right in that we soon forget how strange and mysterious are our capacities, hearing extremity, listening extremity, speaking extremity, touching extremity, seeing extremity, knowing extremity; and that those capacities or extremities may never have come into being except through a dream-life that is steeped in temptations - pre-natal temptations, as well as child-temptations - sexual temptations as well as lust-for-power temptations - to

which we succumbed. Succumbed yes to the vitality of sensation but recoiled in converting the shadow of temptation into a source of original, self-confessing being in creation. (27)

While this passage sums up Robin's earlier dreaming experience, it also foreshadows dumb Ghost's sudden capacity to speak. His cross-cultural utterance (extracts from de la Mare's "The Listeners," from the calypso heard by Robin's grandfather and from T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*) seems to have been provoked by the death of Tiger, who represents deprived humanity. At a further remove from Robin's, it is also a cry of resistance, resistance here to the "death-wish of an age" (32). Robin calls Ghost's message "an edge" which, like the extremities of sensation in the above quotation, is the precarious locus of conversion reached through "the *immediate taste* of temptation" (32, italics mine). What Harris is suggesting in this, as in Robin's second rehearsal of the same event through a different imagery (33-35), is that all our sensuous qualities stimulate the imagination, what he calls "its spectrality and miraculous concreteness."¹¹⁵ Robin's different approaches to the event is a way of exploring alternative grounds of creation.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, his self-questioning about "the origins of perception" can also be seen as an interrogation on the origins of consciousness.¹¹⁷

The other event is Robin's memory of the gift of a ring of "spiritual gold", an "invisible ring" (36, 37) given to him by his mother on his fifth birthday. At this stage the ring seals "a marriage . . . or rehearsal of the origins of tradition" that binds all generations, "the living, the dead, the unborn" (38). Indeed, touching his ring and aware of the presence of Birthday Ghost, Robin *tastes* the wreck of past civilisations and the precise dates of their fall.¹¹⁸ At the same time "the premises of laughter" impinge on his consciousness as he recreates his birthday party "in the chapel perilous under the sea" (39). Whereas earlier on, as revised foetus in his grandfather's *Faust*, he had been aware of the bite of life (albeit simulated by Faust, 21), he now feels united to his mother by the "tooth" or bite of death (40), the last sense experience he recalls before that of drowning now foreboded in the last line of T.S.Eliot's "The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock," "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (40).

The human voices waking Robin in the chapel perilous under the sea belong to his drowned relatives and friends but are also the crowd of voices speaking through W.H. (49), who has himself heard Robin's

drowning voice crying from the ocean “Remember me as I remember you” (48). Though implicit before, the juxtaposition of time with timelessness is now a major factor in Robin’s probing of the creative process. In his afterword to *The Four banks of the River of Space* Anselm writes: “What is the genesis of art? . . . Does it exist on a borderline between two time-scales? One time-scale is clothed by conventional memory. The other perceives that conventional memory is biased.”¹¹⁹ Robin, who so far has mentioned the dates of events with great precision, reaches the borderline between the time dimensions when he comes to the *edge* of a swamp, “THE EDGE OF THE CHAPEL PERILOUS OF THE FLATLANDS” (45) (each crucial stage in his journey is marked by a perilous chapel). The swamp is on the way to the city of Skull, the illusory technological paradise born of Faustian deceptions (54) but also full of the refugees of history, “refugees of spirit” (63). As Robin envisages the kind of future Skull may hold for the masses, he is reminded of the enigma of time (55), again through sensation, by *touching* the bone in the masks of Skull. Time’s dual dimension (its “page” and its “bone”)¹²⁰ opens to him the “Dateless Day Infinity Route or Tunnel” (55) where he meets Peter and Emma in the year AD 2025. Again, he meets them at an edge, “at a junction in the tunnel where the resurrection of the dead seemed to blend with the survival of the endangered living” (57). Robin’s free movement in time, his simultaneous perception of time and timelessness, corresponds to the fluidity of the “immanent substance” taking shape through different creative masks.¹²¹ Thus in AD 1962 he “was aware of Ghost’s extension of himself into W.H.’s ageing mask” (57; see also 47), while in AD 2025 he realises that “W.H. himself had vanished and that someone else – some other ageing mask – played the role of authorship/charactership in my book as if I were he, he me” (57). This fluidity of fictional arousal through successive masks in non-calendrical time induces “the secretion of ageless myth” which, for Harris, is also dynamic, at once archetypal legend **and** “a *capacity* for the conversion of deprivations.”¹²² Myth therefore acts as “a subtle rebuttal of an authoritarian realism – however sophisticated – an authoritarian story line or sophisticated dumping ground in the theatre of Skull for a . . . doomed humanity held in thrall by the logic of violence, the logic of hell” (57). Realism, here as in many of Harris’s critical formulations, is not just literary mimesis in a limited sense but alludes to a single-minded concentration on material and technological progress to the exclusion of deep-seated psychical and spiritual

resources. Robin sees in that rebuttal “the foundations of religious hope” (57) incarnated in Emma who, in AD 2025, has become a priest.

The allegorical rehearsal that now plays itself out (it re-enacts Glass’s “miniaturizing the creation in [himself],” (66), when he was born) involves both the dead (Robin Glass who has not aged since his death in 1961 and is still “immortal youth,” (56) and the living Peter and Emma, who have survived and aged since the drowning accident. Glass and Peter, illusory immortal resurrection body and the death wish of modern civilisation Peter represents (58), must now ascend together the Mountain of Folly, the accumulated follies of the age, *through* which they must seek to elude the fascination of Faust, who tempts them up to his technological heaven. In their ascent, they become each other’s *alter ego*, each other’s “stranger”. And it is their mutual agency (Faust mistakes Peter for Robin) which enables them first to repudiate the deadly rope to heaven held out by Faust and pursue instead “the seam in the wave of the rock” (67); then to resist the fascination of Billionaire Death, the wealth and power it has acquired from the billions “civilization devotes to weapons of destruction” (68). In spite of Faust’s defeat, Glass is nevertheless being cautioned against the possible deceptions and hubris of spirituality itself,¹²³ the danger of confusing the resurrection (a discontinuous alternating phenomenon) with a fixed eternity, as indeed he was tempted to do when he told Ghost “I want to be eternally young, eternally strong” (43). Commenting on *The Infinite Rehearsal*, Harris wrote that “The rigidity of the perpetually young immortal Faust secures the tautology of tyranny, the worship of fascism, of evil.”¹²⁴

As a spiritual adviser to Glass (62-63), Emma plays a major role in his reversal of direction, “reversed sail” (80). More than that, however, as Peter’s alter ego Glass remembers lying with her on the beach after the accident “with his lips within the cover of her hair yet on her breasts” (61). “How remarkable,” he thinks, “that a childhood/adolescent love affair should blossom into a female priesthood and nourish the resurrection body” (63-64). There is a suggestion here that the spirit is no mere abstract disembodied entity and that there is a mutual fertilization between the spiritual and the concrete in the endless process of creation. In the next stage of Glass’s journey towards Skull, when Tiresias has become his guide, he tells him:

Emma’s theology . . . is rooted in the necessity to bring a sacramental urgency to the ancient and perennially fertile body of sex. Not promiscuity, not

cheap stimulation. But something we scarcely understand. The miracle of the senses, touch, taste, echoing waves and particles and penetration. (74-75)

Senses and sacrament are symbolized by the nail which pierced Emma on the beach, a source of both suffering and ecstasy “that shatters all prepossessions” (61) and, if I understand rightly, the organ of what Harris called “numinous sexuality,”¹²⁵ and of the true passion that counterpoints love’s death wish (67), the instrument also that breaks Faustian hubris.

In the last section of his dream journey, Glass first witnesses with Peter the making of the “imaginary substance of greatness that lies in a fabric that we can never wholly grasp” (73). The emblems of powerful historical characters (agents of doom like Napoleon and Alexander¹²⁶) but also Alice’s ring balanced by the stone that killed a Jamaican girl (a balance enacted before in fragile “infinity’s chain,” 70, 71), all topple into a chaotic vortex “moving fast yet still” (73). It is at this stage that the seer Tiresias, who in Glass’s reconstruction of the 1948 strike was the leader of the Tiresias Tiger band, takes over as guide, leading Glass through the wasteland world of Skull with its refugees of soul and spirit. Here Glass sees for the first time the multi-faceted metaphorical figure of Beast that Frog was hoping to catch as if he were another face of Ghost (9). Frog wanted to question him about the map of heaven which Beast now holds in its/his claws and hands. From his earliest fiction the Beast has been a recurring image in Harris’s narratives, now hunting and hunted boar (*Tumatumari*), now hieratic unicorn. It embodies all the paradoxical features and effects of the Faustian drive, for it can be a merciless predator when serving the Faustian ambition to reach heaven and eternity. Hence Glass’s grandfather’s allusion to Faust as “the Beast of immortality, the Beast of the circus and of the machine” (14). Hence also Frog’s wish to see the map of heaven in its hands. Yet Beast is also the hunted victim thoughtlessly exploited by man: “Beast-morsel, Beast-fish, Beast-grain, Beast-shrimp” (76), the Beast that feeds and clothes man. In this capacity Beast is transfigured into an instrument of vision and is involved “in weaving a portion of Emma’s seamless garment” (78). It/he thereby contributes to the religious hope, i.e. the future, that Emma represents in contrast with the divided doomsters and boomsters of Skull. Beast’s “unfinished thread” (80) underpins the creative process, while Emma’s seamless garment (an image of undividedness and wholeness in the making) recalls the garment “all threads of light and fabric” of the Arawak Virgin in

Palace of the Peacock. And as the vision of the Virgin finally “converts” Donne, so Glass’s vision of Beast in its sustaining and creative role helps him to reverse sail towards true survival.

At the end of his autobiography Glass finds himself in front of a blank page and wonders “Whose hand would seek mine, whose mask become my age in the future?” (82). The shadow he then sees on the page is an extension of Ghost as both he and W.H. have been (47), that is the future vessel of the immanent substance. Significantly, the postscript to Glass’s narrative is written by Ghost in AD 2025, who claims “to tap the innermost resources of eclipsed tradition in the refugee voices that W.H. heard in the sea” (86), resources that he himself personifies, as he makes it clear at the beginning of his postscript. They have accumulated in the moving yet still vortex of the sea (76/86) which spins the fabric of the seamless robe. The unfinished thread in the robe is Harris’s variable metaphor for the basic theme of the novel, i.e. the nature of “true survival” as opposed to Faustian immortality. True survival excludes a static eternity. Tiresias insists that he is moved by “a spiritual necessity to look into the heart of true survival, into a shadow linking those who were apparently saved and those who were apparently not” (80). In other words, true survival, for Harris, is an unfinished fabric of existence that interweaves life-in-death and death-in-life, the terms often used by him to sum up his philosophy of existence. Simultaneously, the unfinished thread weaves and is woven into what he calls the “fabric of the Imagination,” here the fictionalization or, I would say, a relativization of life and death as well as of all the actors in the creative process, “when fiction [i.e. the momentum of emerging fiction] fictionalizes authors and characters alike” (48).

In his article on “Self and Politics in Wilson Harris” Paget Henry describes spirit in Harris’s fiction as a “universal living medium whose creativity and agency are necessary for all forms of existence.” Discussing *Carnival*, he stresses the importance of spirit in “Harris’s approach to the politics of self-formation and hence to everyday politics.¹²⁷ It should be obvious from my reading of *The Infinite Rehearsal* that the political is not altogether absent from this novel. Faustian will-to-power, the supremacy of the machine, the emphasis on the bankruptcy of civilization, on “the illiteracy of the economic imagination” (27, 28) which entails the despair and violence of the deprived, all partake of a pessimistic political vision.¹²⁸ Glass even thinks he is involved in a “political parable of mind and soul born of childhood remembered visions in an age of dangerous superpowers

professing the good intention out of cunning self-interest, the good life out of expedient design" (66-67). My impression, however, is that increasingly in his later novels, and certainly in *The Infinite Rehearsal* spirit as an alternative to, rather than a support of, any worldly agency is Harris's way out of what he sees as the death of an age. The "polarizations of Faustian morality" (13), either "capital block prosperity" (12) or "Marxist block necessity" (13) are countered by Emma's "divine communism" (59/64). As a priest, soon to become Archbishop of Canterbury and a major actor in Glass's conversion, Emma is the first character in Harris's fiction to embody so specifically the religious substance of spirit. Harris himself does not belong to any institutionalized church but claims to be a "Christian Gnostic,"¹²⁹ and, as we know, Christ figures prominently in his fiction¹³⁰ and is indirectly evoked in this novel in the "resurrection body." The theme of the resurrection has been treated in many different ways in Harris's earlier novels.¹³¹ In *The Infinite Rehearsal* there is a conflation of the sacred and the profane as Glass sails towards Emma. The end of the novel also clearly reiterates the conception of fiction as a manifestation of spirit. In the typescript Glass refers to "the birth of spirit, the birth of creativity".¹³² In the printed version, as he yields his pen to an as yet faceless author, he declares: "Spirit is one's ageless author, ageless character, in the ceaseless rehearsal, ceaseless performance, of the play of truth" (82). That Glass should then disappear and the postscript be written by Ghost is a further expression of both the origin and the nature of fiction, the immanent substance born of the essence (in Harris's terms the "absence presence") of all human experience and its transient return to oblivion in the depths of the sea. "Remember me," the cry uttered by Glass to W.H. (48), by Emma to Glass (63) and by Ghost to the reader (87/88) is an appeal from eclipsed humanity to initiate all over again its resurrection through fiction.

Notes

⁸⁵ Wilson Harris, "Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View," in Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*, 133.

⁸⁶ I am grateful to Gemma Robinson, who photocopied for me the early 1952 and 1954 editions of Wilson Harris's poems at the University of Guyana.

⁸⁷ Wilson Harris, *Eternity to Season*, 19.

⁸⁸ Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal*, London, Faber and Faber (1987). All page references are to this edition and are given in the text.

⁸⁹ On this subject see in particular “Literacy and the Imagination” and “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination,” both in Wilson Harris’s *Selected Essays*. See also *The Radical Imagination*, 87.

⁹⁰ Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism,” in *Collected Poems*, 59.

⁹¹ Penelope Murray, ed., *Genius. The History of an Idea*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 1.

⁹² I am grateful to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin for a Mellon Fellowship which enabled me to examine some of Wilson Harris’s manuscripts kept at that institution.

⁹³ Wilson Harris, “A Note on re-visionary cycles in the composition of *Carnival*” (dated April 1991). I am grateful to Vera Kutzinski for sending me a copy of this note.

⁹⁴ Commenting on *Carnival*, Vera Kutzinski writes that “Harris’s revised text is considerably denser than the manuscript passages are, a density – and opacity – that results whenever he cancels vestiges of realism.” “Realism and Reversibility in Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*,” 29. Her essay is the first to examine the manuscripts of *Carnival* and comes after J.J. Healy’s comments on the manuscripts of *Ascent to Omai*.

⁹⁵ This metaphysical constituent is particularly prominent in *The Carnival Trilogy*. On this subject see also Paget Henry’s illuminating article “Framing the Political: Self and Politics in Wilson Harris,” forthcoming in a special Wilson Harris issue of *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures*.

⁹⁶ Ghost explains to Glass that in *Skull* the “refugees of spirit [are] in flight from themselves,” (51).

⁹⁷ See, among others, “The Fabric of the Imagination.”

⁹⁸ Coming after the “New Forest” location in *Carnival*, the combination of “Old” with “New” indicates a further dialectical stage in the Dantesque journey.

⁹⁹ See *The Radical Imagination*, 87. In the Note on the composition of *Carnival* Harris also speaks of “a re-visionary intentionality,” 2.

¹⁰⁰ Holograph draft, 40.

¹⁰¹ “A Note on re-visionary cycles in the composition of *Carnival*, 3. Vera Kutzinski describes *Carnival* as “fiction of joint multiple authorship”, in “Realism and Reversibility in Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*,” 15.

¹⁰² Wilson Harris, *Carnival*, London: Faber and Faber (1985), 26.

¹⁰³ See “Adversarial Contexts and Creativity,” which must have been written at about the same time as *The Infinite Rehearsal*. The example Harris repeatedly gives of creation resulting from adversarial encounter is that of the bone flute carved by the Caribs from the bones of their enemies and fashioned into a vessel of music.

¹⁰⁴ Pork-knockers, reputedly poor, prospect the Guyanese interior for gold and diamonds. They were said to take with them a barrel of pork which they would overturn and knock on to get the last slivers of meat as their provisions dwindled. Harris gives that gesture a cosmic dimension of extraordinary poetic power (2 & 3). In fact, the chapter would require a word to word analysis to unravel its concise poetic richness.

¹⁰⁵ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1-3.

¹⁰⁶ Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 187.

¹⁰⁷ “The Fabric of the Imagination,” *Third World Quarterly*, 12, 1 (January 1990), 183.

¹⁰⁸ Among other intertextual subtexts see also *The Tempest*, Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, Burns’s “Auld Lang Syne,” Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* (especially Captain Cat’s exchange with drowned sailors), *Waiting for Godot*, Dante’s *Purgatorio*, v.133, and possibly Christina Rossetti’s “Remember.”

¹⁰⁹ The same conversion already takes place in *Palace of the Peacock*. Note also in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* the grandfather’s censure of the child’s “idolatrous realism” when he confesses to seeing the ghost of a hanged slave above the canal of a former plantation. The grandfather’s rebuke seems to be the seed of his writing as “infinite rehearsal.” *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 25.

¹¹⁰ For instance in *Jonestown* the sexual act is both a gesture of love and a rape.

¹¹¹ Wilson Harris, “Literacy and the Imagination – a talk,” 29.

¹¹² Typescript, 18. See also Faust’s “self-mocking humour” in the printed text (65). When later Robin meets Peter and Emma, he refers to their “capacity to mirror yet repudiate and breach Skull reflexes and automatic behaviours” (60), which is also irony.

¹¹³ *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 17.

¹¹⁴ In the typescript Tiger succumbs to “the Tempter [in both script and novel he is manipulated by Faust], to the lure and fallacy of black (white) purity” (27) while the fear reflected in his eyes is of “the atrophy of passion, the atrophy of love” (typescript, 25).

¹¹⁵ Wilson Harris, “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination,” *Temenos* 13 (1992), 79.

¹¹⁶ In a manuscript of *Ascent to Omai*, Harris refers to alternative routes the novel could have taken which were abandoned, a way of saying that there can never be one absolute path to creation.

¹¹⁷ This question is so far unresolved scientifically. Adam Zeman, “The Problem of Consciousness,” *Prospect*, 47 (December 1999), 50-54.

¹¹⁸ This fits in with Ghost’s personification of the subterranean tradition born of the accumulated experience of humanity’s past though linked, as just seen, to its future.

¹¹⁹ Unpublished Afterword to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, 3.

¹²⁰ Note also that when he last sees his mother, “She fell into the Glass of time. Timelessness” (42).

¹²¹ In a discussion of *Companions of the Day and Night*, Pierre François writes that time and space incur a radical “re-sensing”. Pierre François, “Synchronicity and the Unitarian Geopsyche in Wilson Harris’s *Companions of the Day and Night*,” in Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent, eds., *The Contact and the Culmination. Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek*, 243.

This is also true of *The Infinite Rehearsal*.

¹²² Wilson Harris, “Character and Philosophic Myth,” in Britta Olinder, ed., *A Sense of Place. Essays in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 124. See also “myth breach[ches] the mimicry of natural fact,” “Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination,” in *Explorations*, 101.

¹²³ Wilson Harris stresses the dangerous fascination of eternity as “an extinction of birth and death in human creative terms.” “The Quest for Form,” *Kunapipi* V,1 (1983), 22.

¹²⁴ Wilson Harris, “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination,” 78.

¹²⁵ Ibid.77. Compare with the cosmic intercourse between a log turned phallic tree and “a genesis-cloud . . . in the womb of space.” *Jonestown*, 133. Moreover, the nail gives an ambivalent and creative meaning to Christ’s stigmata.

¹²⁶ The passage takes up and further develops the “band” imagery of the beginning of the novel. The drumming of the bands heralds either doom (“DOOM DOOM”) or the boom of technological development (“BOOM BOOM”). The bands are the instruments of the popular religion and fanaticism to which Peter was addicted.

¹²⁷ Paget Henry, typescript, 3, 1.

¹²⁸ This is also Paget Henry’s view of Harris’s attitude towards politics, although our readings are complementary rather than analogous.

¹²⁹ Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination. Lectures and Talks*, 57. On Gnosticism in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, see Michael Mitchell, “The Seignior of Faust. Gnostic Scenery in *The Infinite Rehearsal*,” forthcoming in the special Harris issue of *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures*.

¹³⁰ See also his recent poems entitled “The Winter Christ,” *Temenos Academy Review* 2 (Spring 1999), 46-49.

¹³¹ On this subject, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, “Faces on the Canvas: the Resurrection Theme in *The Tree of the Sun*,” *World Literature Written in English* 22, 1 (Spring 1983), 88-98.

¹³² Typescript of *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 78.

Works Cited

- François, Pierre, “Synchronicity and the Unitarian Geopsyche in Wilson Harris’s *Companions of the Day and Night*.” *The Contact and the Culmination. Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek*. Ed. Marc Delrez & Bénédicte Ledent. Liège: L3-Liège Language Literature, 1996, 241-261.
- Frazer, James G., *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948.
- Harris, Wilson, *Eternity to Season* with an Introduction by A.J.Seymour, published privately in British Guiana, 1954. London: New Beacon Books, 1978.
- Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber and Faber, 1960.
- The Eye of the Scarecrow*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965.
- Tumatumari*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968.
- “Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination.” *Explorations. A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966-1981*. Ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek. Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981.
- “The Quest for Form.” *Kunapipi* V,1 (1983), 21-27.

“Character and Philosophic Myth.” *A Sense of Place. Essays in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Ed. Britta Olinder. Göteborg: Gothenburg University, Department of English, 1984, 124-130.

Carnival. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.

“Adversarial Contexts and creativity.” *New Left Review* 154 (Nov./Dec. 1985), 124-128.

The Infinite Researsal. Six holograph drafts. Typescript 1986. Box 4 and 5 of the Wilson Harris Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Published version: London: Faber and Faber, 1987.

“Literacy and the Imagination – A Talk.” *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*. Ed. Michael Gilkes. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1989, 13-30. Also in Harris’s *Selected Essays*.

“Comedy and Modern Allegory: A personal View.” *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*. Ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989, 127-140.

The Four Banks of the River of Space. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

“Unpublished Afterword to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*.”

“The Fabric of the Imagination.” *Third World Quarterly* 12, 1 (1990), 175-186.

“A Note on re-visionary cycles in the composition of *Carnival*” (dated April 1991). Box 7 of the Wilson Harris Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

The Radical Imagination. Lectures and Talks. Ed. Alan Riach and Mark Williams. Liège: L3 – Liège Language Literature, 1992.

“The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination.” *Temenos* 13 (1992), 69-85. Also in Harris’s *Selected Essays*.

Jonestown. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Selected Essays of Wilson Harris. The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination. Ed. Andrew Bunday. London: Routledge, 1999.

“The Winter Christ.” *Temenos Academy Review* 2 (Spring 1999), 46-49.

Henry, Paget. “Framing the Political: Self and Politics in Wilson Harris.”
Forthcoming in *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures*.

Kutzinski, Vera. “Realism and Reversibility in Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*.”
Forthcoming in *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures*.

Maes-Jelinek, Hena. “Faces on the Canvas: The Resurrection Theme in *The Tree of the Sun*.” *World Literature Written in English* 22, 1 (Spring 1983), 88-98.

Mitchell, Michael. “The Seignior of Faust. Gnostic Scenery in *The Infinite Rehearsal*.” Forthcoming in *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures*.

Murray, Penelope. Ed., *Genius, The History of an Idea*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Pope, Alexander. “An Essay on Criticism,” 1711. *Collected Poems*. London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1951, 58-76.

Steiner, George. *Real Presences. Is there anything in what we say?* London: Faber and Faber, 1989.

Weston, Jessie L. *From Ritual to Romance*. New York: Doubleday, 1957.

Zeman, Adam. “The Problem of Consciousness.” *Prospect* 47 (December 1999), 50-54.