

Introduction

Approaching Wilson Harris's Creativity

Each man carries the entire form
of the human condition

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ON 29 MARCH 2001 Wilson Harris received an honorary doctorate from the University of Liège in recognition of the greatness and significance of his work. The occasion was also a climax in his long association with the University where he gave the keynote address at the second EACLALS conference in 1974. He has since returned and lectured frequently both in the English department and at scholarly meetings.

On 30 March a conference took place to celebrate his eightieth birthday and the publication of his latest novel, *The Dark Jester*. Wilson Harris himself gave the keynote address followed by Fred D'Aguiar. Other speakers had come specially from the Caribbean, Britain, the United States and various European countries. Wilson Harris said that such a conference could not have taken place ten years before.¹ Though he may underestimate the degree of appreciation in which his work was then held, certainly in academia, there is no doubt that, with the passing of time, the importance of his work is being more widely recognized, while his world vision and some of his ideas, which were always ahead of prevailing contemporary views, are gaining ground among thinkers in various fields. We are pleased that several writers and critics from the Caribbean took part in the conference and/or

¹ See his comments in the Round Table.

contributed to this volume: Gordon Rohlehr, a rare guest at European conferences, was there and, as mentioned above, so was Fred D'Aguiar, who insisted that he had a special covenant with Wilson and was influenced by him. Significantly, other writers of a younger generation, who were unable to attend the conference, were keen to express their admiration for Wilson Harris, in whom they see one of the founding fathers of Caribbean literature, and to pay homage to his extraordinary and continuing creativeness: Cyril Dabydeen, Caryl Phillips, Lawrence Scott, Mark McWatt, Andrew Jefferson-Miles.

This collection in no way seeks to offer a synthesis or a conclusive assessment of Wilson Harris's fifty years of uninterrupted creativity,² though major aspects of his work are discussed. If anything, the diversity of subjects and of approaches to his poetry, fiction and essays is testimony to the infinite variety and richness of his writing. Since his criticism, as much as his fiction, is evidence of the originality of his thought, the contributions have been assembled as closely as possible according to the chronology of his work. From *Eternity to Season* to *The Dark Jester*, Harris's writing has never ceased to develop, the movement and rhythm of his prose and his rich metaphoric language to assume new modulations and shapes even through recurring images. As is well known, he refers to his fictional canvas as "unfinished genesis," one of the striking expressions of which he alone seems to have the secret and which applies not only to his own creative writing but to his perception of a continuously gestating world and cosmos. Hence the essentially open-endedness of his fiction. Although he declared at one stage that *The Dark Jester* was his last novel, his irrepressible urge to create has sparked once more, since he is writing another. It is therefore to be hoped that, in keeping with the unfinished nature of his opus, "the mysterious" thread or "continuity" of life and the imagination,³ no criticism will claim to be a "definitive study," a now fashionable advertisement.

² Even before the publication of *Eternity to Season* in 1954, Harris was writing short fiction and poetry. He started writing at the age of eleven or twelve, and his teacher was so impressed by a piece of his that he founded the school magazine to publish it.

³ Wilson Harris, "The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination," *Temenos* 13 (1992): 71.

Wilson Harris's fiction is a unique literary achievement rooted in the Caribbean, the universal and, as his contribution to the conference makes clear, in the living cosmos. Indeed, his address, from which we have borrowed the title of this volume, illustrates the unusual scope of his art. The "Theatre of the Arts" is first and foremost the living universe, what he calls "the fluid life of the earth" from before the time of man. As he shows in his quotation from *Tumatumari*, the life of man (and his dying self) are embedded in the life of the earth and, as it emerges from its measureless dimension, his art of fiction captures their common filiation. "Theatre of the Arts" also reminds us that Harris's artist-protagonists express their vision through a multiplicity of art forms, since no single art is complete in itself, as we see in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, in which Anselm is engineer, sculptor, painter, architect and composer. While other writers of his generation mostly developed their own version of traditional fiction to express their vision of Caribbean society, generally putting new material into old forms, Harris created a new kind of fiction altogether, innovating in all aspects of the novel – narrative structure, characterization and, as just mentioned, the natural and cosmic setting in which his characters evolve. I will only briefly allude here to two major features of his creative process. One is that from *Palace of the Peacock* onwards the dreaming process rather than rational or 'logical' understanding opens the way to a deeper perception of reality and, paradoxically, to an increased consciousness as well as moral reflexion and awareness in contradistinction to the frequent assumption that dreaming leads us away from a common-sense world.⁴ The paradox, however, is only apparent if one keeps in mind that, by giving access to the unconscious, dreaming can reveal what is so frequently repressed, in particular the unacknowledged emotions and motivations that determine behaviour. The other feature, which still awaits a full-length study, is Harris's

⁴ Interestingly, Jacques Derrida recently expressed a similar view in theoretical terms: "We would be disappointed to be awakened from the worst nightmare because it will have given us the possibility to think the irreplaceable, a truth or a meaning that consciousness might conceal from us when we awake [...]. As if the dream were more vigilant than wakefulness, the unconscious more thinking than consciousness, literature or the arts more philosophical, more critical at any rate than philosophy"; "The Language of the Stranger," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (janvier 2002): 24 (tr. mine).

creation of a new fictional language capable of harmonizing into a seamless whole "the music of the elements,"⁵ man's connection with his environment, as well as his historical and social experience. He achieves this through a fusion of outer and inner world, the sensuous and the invisible, the *apparently* inanimate and the animate, the poetic weaving of the parentage between all living creatures and, above all, the "convertible imagery" which traces the characters' "conversion" and carries the narrative forward.

In the present political context of endlessly spiralling violence, the significance of Harris's work, which originates in the violence of conquest, has never been more relevant. His analysis of its sources and motivation runs through practically all his fiction from *Palace of the Peacock* to *The Dark Jester*. In these two novels, the conquest of the Americas and the conquerors' violence towards the Amerindian populations are, of course, central, while in *Palace* it persists even among the crew, as if centuries of deprivation had sealed their "terminal fate" – Harris's expression for a supposedly inescapable syndrome of vengeance and violence as a result of the "numb insensibility" born of the frustrations of "unrecorded history."⁶ Prophetically, in *Carnival*, he denounces "fashionable cults of political violence that become the stuff of new heroic examples, especially when such cults may be embalmed to resemble innocence [...] or courage."⁷ Masters, the protagonist's guide, says that "Violence seems irreversible in a desperate age where alternatives are fearsome and we appear to have no option but the lesser of two evils. But that is why we need a dual hand [...]."⁸

Duality is the pivot of the paradoxes and ironies informing Harris's fiction, the potential transformation and reversal of each given or apparent situation, behaviour, material forms of existence, painful predicament through the dismantling or breaking apart of entrenched material or psychological conditions. Hence the "transfigurative wound"⁹ and

⁵ Wilson Harris, "Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*," in *Palace of the Peacock* (1960; London: Faber & Faber: 1988): 7.

⁶ Wilson Harris, "Canaima: an Overturning of Habits of Mind in Profoundest Trials of the Imagination," paper (publication forthcoming) read at Liège on 2 June 2000: 4, 6 & 7.

⁷ Wilson Harris, *Carnival* (London, Faber & Faber: 1985): 88.

⁸ *Carnival*, 90.

⁹ *Carnival*, 30.

Masters' at first disquieting assertion that "a dual hand [can] purge us *through violence of violence*."¹⁰ In several novels, violence in men runs in parallel with, or is conveyed through, violence in nature, a storm real and/or metaphorical. In *Palace of the Peacock*, for instance, the storm which takes place in the narrator's head paralyses the crew "like imprisoned dead trees" but eventually frees Donne from his hatred and makes him aware of his loss of imagination.¹¹ Later, on the river at the climax of a storm, "[a] murderous rape and fury" fills the heart of the crew¹² and abates only with Carroll's sacrificial death when he disappears in the rapids. In *Carnival*, the storm on the Atlantic and the "raging human cosmos" are "miniaturized" in Masters' sight when its violence is converted "into the terror of beauty [...] the terror of pity, the terror of gentleness." This is what the protagonist calls "visionary violence's non-violence, storm's peace," while he offers the extremity or "edge" of his experience to Christ.¹³ In *The Dark Jester*, the storm rages through Atahualpa's confrontation with the Bishop, who forces on him conversion to Catholicism. It takes several forms – storm of history, storm of psyche, natural and cosmic storm – in which the Dreamer hears a response to his prayer and perceives dissimilar forces:

Atahualpa was forced to become a Christian by the Bishop in Cajamarca. Force is another symptom of spiritual deprivation in Church and State. But the *distinctive* forces of the waves – that are present in the arts of old, in the role of the gods – the distinctive forces in hidden storms, the distinctive forces in the Earth, bring home new premises that are blinding in their diversity.¹⁴

The last sentence and the earlier quotations from *Carnival* suggest that the storm itself contains the seed of the subversion of violence, though this is never a final achievement but at best a fragile, always to be re-iterated inversion. It must also be pointed out that Harris's solution to violence is not political, or at least not primarily so but moral and, with increasing insistence, spiritual, although, ultimately, personal spiritual

¹⁰ *Carnival*, 90.

¹¹ Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960): 55.

¹² *Palace of the Peacock*, 74.

¹³ *Carnival*, 91.

¹⁴ Wilson Harris, *The Dark Jester* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001): 104. Further page references are in the main text.

conversion must have an impact on social transformation. Already in *Palace of the Peacock* redemption was spiritual, and Harris's mysticism has often been underlined since then. But there seems to have been a reticence among critics to comment on the religious strain in his fiction. Even Paget Henry, whose comprehensive discussion of the nature of "Spirit" and of the "spiritual dynamics" in Harris's work is truly illuminating, approaches it through what he calls Harris's "philosophical anthropology" and the central role of "archetypal creativity"¹⁵ in his fiction. Christ and the Virgin (or Virgins in *Jonestown*) are indeed archetypal figures, free of any institutional religious affiliation, as are the daemons, vengeful gods or fallen angels in some novels. Nevertheless, the self-sacrificial outcome of his characters' quest – Cristo's in *The Whole Armour*, Anselm's in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, Bone's in *Jonestown* and the Dreamer's in *The Dark Jester* – implies more than the ego yielding its supremacy to a recognition of Spirit.¹⁶ The emphasis on remorse, self-confession, and the eventual acceptance of self-sacrifice, not just to attain self-fulfilment but to 'save' the community, clearly originate in the religious Christian tradition.¹⁷ The conversion of Donne and his crew in *Palace of the Peacock* is of an essentially spiritual, even religious, nature. Vigilance's perception of an "indestructible element"¹⁸ and of a "nameless kinship of spirit"¹⁹ at the heart of all creation; his vision of "the blue ring of pentecostal fire in God's eye";²⁰ "Christ's tree and home"²¹ into which natural and human

¹⁵ Paget Henry, "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Philosophical Anthropology," *CLR James Journal* 7.1 (1999–2000): 104, 131. See also, by the same author, "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Poeticism," in *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000): 90–114, and "Framing the Political: Self and Politics in Wilson Harris," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 2.1–3 (Spring 2000): 82–95.

¹⁶ Note that Henry sees the relationship between ego and spirit as political because of their struggle for power in the self and their "analogical reach" to state, civilization and even the human condition. "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Philosophical Anthropology," 117–19.

¹⁷ Paget Henry does mention the religious origin of Spirit but his emphasis is on its creative potential in the social and political fields.

¹⁸ *Palace of the Peacock*, 84.

¹⁹ *Palace of the Peacock*, 85.

²⁰ *Palace of the Peacock*, 116.

²¹ *Palace of the Peacock*, 137.

elements are metamorphosed by "the newborn wind of spirit" when the narrator's vision makes one with that of "the soul of the universe"²² and the crew's poise between union and separation as a "sacrament and embrace [...] in one undying soul";²³ all partake of a Christian spirituality. Nevertheless, the "hunter Christ" figure in *Palace of the Peacock* and subsequent novels is, to say the least, highly unorthodox.²⁴

Paget Henry rightly explains that "Spirit" is the "unfathomable Creator"²⁵ who sustains creaturely existence through an infinite array of archetypal surrogates. Consequently, all forms of life are rooted in Spirit; they are "masks" or "material expressions of Spirit."²⁶ Harris himself talks of "variables" as agents speaking through a ventriloquism of Spirit.²⁷ He points out that "[t]he ancient pre-Columbians pursued a creator beyond seizure, a creator whose likeness could never be rendered exactly."²⁸ In the same essay he also gives examples of different masks ("profiles of myth"), racial features in pre-Columbian art expressing their perception of human identity as "fluid and variable," encompassing animal, human and godlike features.²⁹ It therefore seems obvious that the ontological complexity of his characters and their relationship to Spirit is not only Christian but inspired by what he calls his intuitive apprehension of pre-Columbian art. At the end of *Carnival* when Weyl and his wife Amaryllis adopt Masters' child, they see in her "the child of a pagan and Christian master. Both! Pagan and Christian! Such a blend [...] would illumine [...] every global fall from colonial plantation into metropolitan factory."³⁰

In this fusion of the Pagan (retrieved from oblivion) and the Christian/Western traditions Harris sees a way of subverting humanity's

²² *Palace of the Peacock*, 146.

²³ *Palace of the Peacock*, 152.

²⁴ See *Jonestown*, 41, 51, 149.

²⁵ See *Jonestown*, 102.

²⁶ Paget Henry, "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Philosophical Anthropology," 108–109.

²⁷ Wilson Harris, "Profiles of Myth and the New World," in *Nationalism vs Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, ed. Wolfgang Zach & Ken L. Goodwin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1996): 82.

²⁸ "Profiles of Myth," 81.

²⁹ "Profiles of Myth," 79.

³⁰ *Carnival*, 171.

tendency to absolutize its necessarily partial views and of acknowledging that these are rooted in an immanent creative Spirit beyond them. This is the informing ethos of his religious thought and of his art. It explains his criticism of an excessive man-centred humanism that perceives one aspect of reality only. It also accounts for his conviction that only a recognition of the "intact" and "complex reality"³¹ at the heart of the universe and of the many forms of otherness that coalesce in it enables man to curb the claims of his ego (a major aspect of self-confession) and to forego his thirst for power at all levels, hence also of the violence manifest even in his depredations of nature.

There is no economic solution to the ills of the world [he writes] until the arts of originality – arts that are driven by mysterious strangeness – open the partialities and biases of tradition in ways that address the very core of our pre-possession.³²

And in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*:

[...] why should Spirit surrender its voicelessness [...] to sounding rocks and waters and fires and soil except as a medium of the Word beyond the absolute logic of human discourse, and as an index of live fossil shells and eloquent lips in pebble and wood and wing long buried in the earth [...].³³

It is in this light that one must understand Harris's criticism of Marxism and of resistance theories with their emphasis on economic solutions and social rather than personal reform.

The fusion of pre- and post-Conquest cultures reaches a climax in *The Dark Jester*. Since of all Harris's characters the Dreamer in this novel comes closest to what he calls the universal unconscious, the narrative captures, perhaps more strikingly than ever, the linkages between all forms of being and the multifarious shapes or "masks" emerging from the informing Spirit. Given Harris's own analogy with music in the narrative structure, one can compare this arousal with the creative process within Robert Schumann:

³¹ *Carnival*, 162, 87.

³² "The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination," 73.

³³ Wilson Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993): 35.

Alongside his very deep exploration of archetypal essences in sound [...] Schumann was simultaneously exploring possibilities of giving "voice" to the imaginal persons of his psyche – in the sense of allowing them to compose whole movements of his works.³⁴

The archetypal essences that Harris explores and gives voice to are called "unfathomable creator" or "centre", "mysterious strangeness" or "strangest living", and "abysmal, otherness", "subterranean tradition", "womb of space" or "third nameless dimension", "living fossil strata", "absent deity" or "absent other", "the sacred". While all these variants are not exactly synonymous, they all partake of the multiple, dynamic entity Harris calls Spirit whose creative potential is channelled through the imagination. "The keyword for me as a writer", says Harris, "is imagination."³⁵ Much has been written on this subject, and I just want to emphasize its spiritual origin, its role as the very principle of life, the essence of existence, and the common agent of creativity in both "unfathomable Creator" and, partially, intermittently, in man,³⁶ in whom it depends on a recognition of the other.³⁷ We saw that "the wind of Spirit" in *Palace* breathes life into "the palace of the universe". In *Jonestown* in the chapter entitled "Breath" Bone's "skeleton-twin" tells him "We must learn to embrace the Enigma of Spirit if we are to see its relics breathe again, live again."³⁸ In *The Dark Jester* the breath of life becomes the dynamic force of the "wind of prayer" (60):

The Jester smiled and I felt his uncanny laughter strike me like a whip, the whip of prayer on stone or rock [...]. (15)

The stone gods *speak* even as they *bleed* to a whip of prayer. (19)

³⁴ Noel Cobb, *Archetypal Imagination: Glimpses of Gods in Life and Art* (Hudson NY: Lindisfarne P, 1992): 162.

³⁵ Wilson Harris, "The Voyaging Imagination (Undreamt-of-Resources of Spirit)," unpublished, slightly different draft of an essay, entitled "Intuition, Myth, Imagination, Memory," in *How Novelists Work*, ed. Maura Dooley (Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales Press, 2000): 5.

³⁶ I don't think this is a sign of arrogance which would be akin to the Faustian desire for immortality Harris denounces.

³⁷ "Those hidden texts may never [...] be absolutely translated. They are wilderness music. They infuse an uncharted realm, a mysterious density, into every chart of the Word"; *Jonestown*, 99.

³⁸ *Jonestown*, 151.

And, further in the Dreamer's quest,

I scarcely heard [the warning Voice in the hidden Storm of the elements] though it was a Voice responding to an unspoken prayer in me. (102)

I pray all over again to the true Christ to whom I had addressed an unspoken prayer earlier in my Dream. And there flashes a response on the waves of the Sea. (104)

This emphasis on prayer initiates here a dialogue with the sacred, with the "protean reality of the gods",³⁹ with an historical past fallen into the Void: "The wind of prayer [...] brings Atahualpa close to me" (60).

A striking feature in Harris's narratives is the evolution and conversion of metaphors which, by degrees, weave a kaleidoscopic vision of the creative essence. So "the wind of prayer" becomes the "wind of art" (62, 66) and therefore of imagination,⁴⁰ which simultaneously infuses a reviving movement into a frozen historical past and into nature while also inspiring the Dreamer's consciousness. Although at a first reading the links between the different parts of the complex inner reality are not always obvious, one traces in *The Dark Jester* their association in the origins of art which, as already implied, nevertheless remain unreachable except in intermittent flashes of perception. Harris has alluded to the inner complex reality as "texts of being" or "texts of reality".⁴¹ In his latest novel he equates them with art itself. That art encompasses the whole of creation is suggested when, after a vision of the cosmic and natural worlds, the Dreamer wonders: "Who had created such visionary and terrifying art (such terror and beauty and wisdom) before the times of Man in a Sky of dream?" (13).

Again at the heart of this process is the fragile equilibrium between overlapping opposites which informs the very methodology of creation, the interplay between intuition and counter-intuition, the abysmal Void which is nevertheless "a threshold into alternative universes" (93) and is "pregnant with many languages of art and partial fictions of uni-

³⁹ Wilson Harris, "The Phenomenal Legacy," in *Explorations. A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1981): 47.

⁴⁰ Noel Cobb also writes that "[p]rayer is an act of imagination" and refers to the "divine breath of the imagination," *The Archetypal Imagination*, 44, 30.

⁴¹ Wilson Harris, "The Fabric of the Imagination," in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup & Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 23, 19.

versality" (94). Art is a mere commodity for Pizarro but even reduced to mere ruin may coincide with "an origin we never seize" (94); art is also flesh on a plank in a slave-ship which yet travels towards "the promise of creation" (109). Indeed, at the end of the novel art is the "abused flesh and blood" (101) of Eldorado, victimized Amerindian and African in the body of a slave-ship whom the Dreamer visualizes "through Oblivion to the Conquest, beyond the Conquest, into the fleet of the Middle Passage, running from Africa to America into market places for the arts of the flesh" (101). As we know from Harris's earliest writings, Eldorado is also the City of God identified in *The Dark Jester* with the Hidden City of Vilcabamba. The journey towards that "City without maps" (79) which "remains perpetually hidden" (74) is conveyed through two metaphors that recur throughout Harris's fiction. One is the Bird which could be a cruel eagle but which, from the beginning of the dream, embodies the "spiritual eye" and flies with "subtle wings of particled incandescence bringing a new genesis of space" (4, 13, 20).⁴² It makes the Dreamer aware of the affiliation between cosmic and creaturely forms, singing with several voices in one and in "igneous words" (2) as it interprets the fire of creation. As the mouthpiece of Spirit, the Bird's song blends with the cry of victimized Atahualpa (77) and his grieving people (67) and with the upheaval of the land, which all nourish the substance of Spirit and of art, whose dynamic takes the shape of "the wing of art" (101) and of "wings on a ship [...] the unbearable wings of impossible/possible re-generation blown by art across ages, across centuries" (60).

One other metaphor has been running through Harris's fiction since *Palace of the Peacock* – the ship or multilayered vessel invoking the conquest of the Americas, the Middle Passage, expeditions into the Guyanese heartland and the vehicle of an expanding consciousness. Hence the Dreamer's allusions to his "Ship of the Mind" (65). The moving ship is also a symbol of endless discovery and unfinished creation, the last image in several Harrissian fictional journeys:

⁴² Cf. in *Palace of the Peacock*, "they had passed the door of inner perception like a bird of spirit breaking the shell of the sky," 94.

And then the prow of the great ship began to move forward, the water surged and swelled and a chorus of voices, the chorus of incarnation or human orchestra, filled the air with presences.⁴³

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⁴³ Wilson Harris, *The Tree of the Sun* (Faber & Faber, 1978): 94.