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Music in Wilson Harris's Writing

For Wolfgang, a lover of music.

*Is there a language akin to music threaded into space and time
which is prior to human discourse?*

Harris, "The Music of Living Landscapes"

The originality of Wilson Harris's novels lies predominantly in his use of language. Other writers may share his approach to life and his perception of man's place in the universe but his work is unique in its perfect coalescence of content and form. Harris believes in the interrelatedness of all elements in life. Nature, humanity, fauna and flora partake of the same essence, are partial materialisations of an "unfathomable" wholeness, unfathomable God or Spirit towards which his characters progress but never reach. This interrelatedness makes for a fusion in his writing of all categories of being and also accounts for its dynamism and fluidity. It informs the constitution, the ontology of both nature and men. Nature, in Harris's words, is never passive; it is "sentient and alive" ("Imagination Dead Imagine" 187), even humanised as when he talks of the "veins and arteries of the South American landscape" (Introduction to *Palace of the Peacock* 3). Moreover, the landscape has its own psychology – Harris speaks of the "psyche of space" ("Psyche of Space" 11) and in a sense evinces a moral being. It is a source of beauty but also of terror; it creates and annihilates.¹ Similarly, the human psyche is a "womb of space." It has its own geological ages, earthquakes, landslides and volcanoes. This is particularly obvious in *Ascent to Omai* in which the characters' life-span evoke the geological history of the earth. A simple example from Harris's first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*, can illustrate this correspondence between landscape and man. The narrator relates his dreaming account of the

¹ Harris speaks of the "untamable cosmos" (*Womb of Space* 39). After the recent destructive tsunami in Southern Asia, one cannot help seeing the truth of Harris's statement: "Nature erupts in orchestras of Nemesis" ("Music of Living Landscapes" 43).

voyage of a skipper and his crew on a nameless river in the Guyanese interior towards El Dorado:

The map of the savannahs was a dream. The names Brazil and Guiana were colonial conventions I had known from childhood. I clung to them as to a curious necessary stone and footing ... the ground I knew I must not relinquish.... They were as close to me as my ribs, the rivers and the flatland.... I could not help cherishing my symbolic map, and my bodily prejudice like a well-known room and house of superstition within which I dwelt. (20)

Such humanisation of nature explains why the landscape has a language and music of its own. Examples abound in Harris's writing from the "whispering leaves" and "sighing forest" in *Palace of the Peacock* to the "singing rocks" in *Tumatumar*. In *The Dark Jester* when the last Inca Atahualpa dies, nature shares with his people the grief caused by his execution: "The music of nature, padded with loud tears of sorrow, comes across space and time. An orchestra peals in silence and then settles into tumbling rocks" (66–67). In "The Music of Living Landscapes" Harris explains that on his land surveying expeditions in Guyana he learned from the Amerindians "of the parable of the music of the fish in a rippling stream. They baited their fisherman's hook ... as if they addressed an invisible orchestra" (41). On the other hand, in *The Radical Imagination* he writes:

When the human animal understands his genius, he roots it in the creature, in the forest, in the trees, in other words in the language which we *are* and which we acquired, not only from our mother's lips but also from the sound of the rain falling, from the sigh of the leaves, from the music of the earth as we pressed on it, what crackled under our feet. (78)

Harris also refers to "a profound treaty of sensibility between the human presence on this planet and the animal kingdom," of which he finds striking examples in pre-Columbian art, an art that expresses a "variable and fluid identity" ("Imagination Dead Imagine" 188).

Just as there is interrelatedness between all aspects of creation, so there is a basic connection between the different arts. In *The Womb of Space* Harris refers to "a coincidence of arts ... so that a poem or fiction may absorb metaphors that relate to painting or sculpture or organic images of music" (91). In *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* he mentions an *ars combinatorial* (44), and in several novels, notably *The Four Banks of the River of Space* and *The Mask of the Beggar*, the artist/protagonist practises several arts for he is sculptor, painter, architect, composer. In his later novels the major characters travel both physically and in imagination towards what I referred to above as "unfathomable wholeness,"

which in different contexts is also presented, as suggested, as "Spirit" or the "Sacred" or the unconscious, and is also the source of the arts, their never-to-be trapped origins. Already in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* the major character had self-reflexively commented on the joint arousal of language and consciousness:

Language is one's medium of the vision of consciousness. There are other ways ... of arousing this vision. But language alone can express (in a way which goes beyond any physical or vocal attempt) ... the ultimate "silent" and "immaterial" complexity of arousal.... It is the sheer mystery—the impossibility of trapping its own grain—on which poetry lives and thrives. And this is the stuff of one's essential understanding of the reality of the original Word, the Well of silence. (95)

The "original Word" and "the Well of Silence" evoke the unfathomable origins of the arts. "We need today," Harris writes, "an openness to the language of the imagination simultaneous with a grasp of the Sacred..." ("Imagination Dead Imagine" 191), a statement that applies to music as it is first heard in *Palace of the Peacock*. Carroll, the youngest member of the crew, is "a boy gifted with his paddle as if it were a violin and a sword in paradise" (22). He is the first to die as he falls into the rapids and his companions hear "an indestructible harmony ... the sadness of the baptismal lamentation on his lips ... in the heart of the berserk waters" (75–76). Towards the end of the novel, just after the emergence of the palace of the peacock (a metaphor for the "unfinished genesis of the imagination"²) shaped by music out of natural elements, Carroll's music is heard again issuing from an inner invisible source:

Carroll was whistling. A solemn and beautiful cry.... It was an organ cry almost.... It seemed to break and mend itself always ... the echo of sound so pure and outlined in space it broke again into a mass of music.... I had never witnessed and heard such sad and glorious music.... The dark notes rose everywhere, so dark, so sombre, they broke into a fountain ... sparkling and immaterial as invisible sources and echoes. (147–48)

Music as an expression of the Sacred is also heard at the end of *Jonestown* when the protagonist is pushed into the void (the locus of victimized people[s]) by his native judges: "Black-out music. Black soul music. I fell into a net of music, the net of the huntsman Christ" (233). In the passages quoted music is not just an expression of harmony; it is the very source of creation, God's instrument in the evolution of the visible world as well as an agent of conversion of static conditions

² In a dialogue with Edward Said the famous conductor Daniel Barenboim expresses a similar notion when he says that "music is not about being but about becoming" (Barenboim and Said 21).

and states of mind: "When music and unspoken prayer animate language, all proportionalities of being and non-being, genesis and history, are subject to a revisionary focus" (*Jonestown* 97).

Harris's concept of cross-culturality between different historical periods, different peoples, between "one" and "the other" finds its most original interpretation in his discussion of the Carib bone-flute. The Caribs used to eat a morsel of flesh of their enemies in order to gain some insight into their plans of attack, which is why the Spaniards labelled them cannibals. From beneath that morsel they extracted a bone that they fashioned into a flute. In this way they created a "mutuality" between alien cultures and, paradoxically, it was destruction (cannibalism) which stimulated creativity, for they saw in the bone-flute the very origins of music. In the novella *Yurokon. The Sleepers of Roraima. A Carib Trilogy* the young boy of the title is the last Carib, and he tries to understand why his people are represented as cannibals. He perceives a cleavage in both landscape and the Carib psyche. This psychological chasm is expressed by the bone-flute that becomes an instrument of release, giving voice to a harmony of contrasts among men. For Harris, the Mexican figure of Quetzalcoatl is related to the South American figure of Huracan, itself related to Yurokon. The bone-flute metaphorically represents "a numinous bridge that arches invisibly from ancient Mexico into the ancient Guyanas and South America" (*The Radical Imagination* 83) and therefore voices the correspondence between music and architecture.³ Yurokon sitting at a Carib campfire is "steeped in fire" as in other elements such as the wind, which, similarly, is both destructive and creative like the bone-flute, made of an enemy. So, Harris sees yet another association between fire and music. We see this at the end of *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, in which a character named Hope has consigned in a "dream-book" the trials of his companions in the asylum below Sorrow Hill. An inmate who saw Father Robson making love with his sister has set Father Robson's church on fire. But the fire is then converted, transfigured into a creative one:

The curtain of the theatre of fire fell upon the sin-eaters from the asylum of the greats and enclosed them.... A trinity of pens lay now within the breach of catastrophe, eloquent, cool flame, charcoal burn and splinter.... Hope seized them all with ecstatic gratitude as if he stood all over again upon the very threshold of his book and a chorus of griefs arose within which an unseen orchestra moved and

³ Plato drew a similar parallel between music and architecture, an idea taken up by the Renaissance theorist L. B. Alberti who in his treatise *De re aedificatoria* (1485) expressed "the principle according to which architecture, like music, is the art which penetrates the mind most profoundly and completely matches its exigencies" (Chastle 133; trans. mine).

reassembled singing, dancing pillars where flame had stood around the ageless Mask of the seer. (244)

As Harris wrote about this novel, "Music in the text is simultaneous with the incandescent imagination" ("Quetzalcoatl" 39). Again, this is fictionalised in *The Dark Jester* in which the incandescent imagination is metaphorised in a bird:

A Bird with incandescent wings nested in the tree. They seemed monstrous in one flame, monstrously beautiful, immaculate but evasive, in another veined root or leaf that blazed. The lighted fanfare arose in a tree that blossomed. (13)

And further when the Dreamer/protagonist's vision extends to cosmic dimensions:

Now it dawned on me that the pyramid of the Moon and the pyramid of the Sun were placed in a musical fugue, or adventurous passage, that spoke of Earth and Moon together in faintly remembered, half-forgotten dimensions.... The unnerving ... music that arose from the nebulous Bird lay in its wings, so stretched, so quivering in savagery and in tenderness it became a theme of opposites, white and black flames. (21–22)

Music as "a theme of opposites" implies that even when it expresses harmony, it cannot be idealized since, whether in actual life or beyond it, it contains its reverse potentially. As the protagonist in *Jonestown* reflects: "it was clear to me that dissonances in music lie in depth within all harmonies to acquaint us with unwritten relationships that disturb our sleep. Or else harmony would consolidate itself into an illusion..." (21). Harris also makes this clear in the preface he wrote to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, in which he supposedly edits the "dream-book" of a character named Anselm, "engineer, sculptor, painter, architect composer," who disappeared in the jungle. Anselm had told him that he traced the linkages between alien and separate appearances in his book "by emphasizing musical or antiphonal discourses mirrored unfathomably as the genesis of sound, painted or sculpted unfathomably..." (XIII–XIV).

Four Banks is probably the novel in which Harris's perception of the different roles of music comes most to the fore. The antiphonal discourses evoke "alternative existences" (5), suffused with "alternative rhythms" (XII). Rhythm is a major feature in Harris's narratives informing its stylistic variations and its general structure, a substitute for the linearity that he criticizes in the realistic English novel. Since he considers the text as equivalent with reality (note his many references to the Word made flesh), music is the connecting thread between the different parts of the novel, between all elements in nature and in the cosmos as

well as between the visible and the invisible worlds, the living and the dead. At one stage Anselm has a “glimmering apprehension” of “the innermost genius of the planet ... the genesis of art, the being of music” (39). Music is heard in “the rhythm of the pooled stars” (43) but also in the abyss (9) and is a door opening into the unconscious (8).

One passage in particular illustrates the transcendental role of music.⁴ Anselm mourns the death of three Macusi children who sang in the choir of Penelope, a missionary, and who drowned on a boating expedition. Remembering their voices, he sculpts them into a flute and hears in its music first a dialogue between the living and the dead:

I said to Penelope, “a living language is a precious ladder, it’s the antiphon of the flute in which the dead and the living discourse in the heights and the depths. Listen to the voice of the drowned children. They live again within the solid music and within the elusive story they tell.” (43)

The flute then makes him aware of the “invisible stream of the river of the dead far below the visible Potaro river”:

The flute tells that the river of the dead and the river of the living are one quantum stream possessed of four banks ... [t]he murmur of the buried stream comes up to us as if its source lies in the stars and it may only be heard when we are abnormally attentive to the mystery of creation and the voice of the flute within the lips of three drowned children. (44)

The flute also relates to “ancestral tongues, Macusi, Carib, Arawak, Wapishana pre-Columbian tongues that have been eclipsed.”⁵ “From such eclipse emerges the rich spoil and upheaval of the Word” (44). Finally, “the voice of the spiralling flute mirrors within solid music the ascension of the spirits of the living and the dead through rock and cloud into space” (44–45).

Harris’s conception of the existential process as life-in-death and death-in-life is one of the ways in which he counters a one-sided perception of life.⁶ Again music liberates from such single-mindedness, as we see in *The Mask of the Beggar*:

⁴ On this transcendence, see also the Dreamer’s allusion to “the essence of music emerging as an immortal summons to me” (*The Dark Jester* 68).

⁵ For Harris the pre-Columbian peoples that have been exterminated and eclipsed are part of the “unfathomable wholeness.”

⁶ His reference in one of the above quotations to a “quantum stream” is inspired by the multiplicity implicit in quantum theory. One of the epigraphs to *Four Banks* runs: “Quantum reality consists of simultaneous possibilities, a ‘polyhistoric’ kind of being ... incompatible with our ... one-track minds (Nick Herbert, *Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics*).”

A wordless music arose all of a sudden around me in the Storm of creation. It hit me as it hit the god in the room who seemed unable to say a word.... Not unlike Death he seemed in the shapes around him, bodily shapes that seemed alive. They move or seem to move with lifelikeness. They are unconscious of the rhythms of music that touch other and deeper lives in the prisons of materialism.... With wordless music and the rhythms it brought into being I could rescue those in prison.... I had seen the emergence of the drowned Ship with its Immigrants into Harbourtown but had not understood the rhythms of the images that sprang from a music in Space that spoke of life within and beyond lifelikeness. (64–65)

“Within” and “beyond” remind us both that it is *through* the material world that one reaches its inner spirit and that Harris visualises the universe in all its dimensions in space and time. At one stage in *The Dark Jester* the Dreamer is impressed by the “shadowy brilliance of vision, distant yet close,” he has just had and 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). “Beyond” also suggests the otherworldly origin of language and of all the arts, including music. Still in *The Dark Jester* the Dreamer refers to a diversity of interpretations of Byzantine civilization that remains “open ... beyond the finality of human discourse” (ix). In one of his essays Harris insists on the “fallibility of a purely human discourse” and comments on the speech of a creator and his/her agents in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*: “Such speech exists, as it were, in some priority that comes before human utterance. In that priority lies the mystery of the exact Word of creation...” (“Profiles of Myth” 82). He goes on saying, “There is a Silence that is interior within, anterior to, the human myth of the Word. Silence in the depth of that myth of the absolute Word ripples into layers of sound within all gestures, all species, within the shape of rocks ... (82). This naturally recalls the eruption of language and music from the “Well of Silence” which stimulates consciousness and imagination for it “ignite[s] in oneself a reverie of pulse and heart and mind” (“Living Landscapes” 40–41). In *Four Banks* this inner silent music is repeatedly felt by Anselm to open his eyes to his own limitations: “Those true voices in the live fossil blood of music could turn nevertheless and tear one’s convictions into shreds...” (137), and he also talks of “the instructive bite of music” (140). Interestingly, in his dialogue with Edward Said (see note 2) Daniel Barenboim says that “every great work of art has two faces: one toward its own time and one toward eternity,” also that there is something “timeless” (Barenboim and Said 52) about Mozart’s music, while Edward Said says “I find music fascinating in part because it encompasses silence” (23).

Barenboim also refers to “the color of sound” (81), an association of arts that Harris has often discussed and conceived in his fiction. To hear colour and to see

sound engenders a correspondence between painting and music⁷ expressed at the end of the of the nineteenth century by artists like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Gauguin and Debussy and was discussed by Kandinski at the beginning of the twentieth century to explain the development of abstract painting. Harris comments on this subject in relation to the art of the Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams:

I came upon Aubrey Williams's work for the first time in Jamaica in 1970.... I wrote then of the music of colour orchestrated in his canvases. I suggested that this lament was symbolic of the vanished Arawaks. But there are peculiar aspects to such orchestrated tone, or music, I would like to bring into play now. The 'eye' may be deeply affected by combinations of colour. So much so that the 'ear' picks up those combinations and *hears* what *painted space* is saying. *Painted space* "speaks" to the "ear." ("On Aubrey Williams" 26)⁸

Harris also wrote:

When I look at a Cezanne, for instance, I sense quite often the mood of sculpture. When I look at an Aubrey Williams something quite different may happen that I can only describe as an equation with fantastic rhythmic being in startling as well as subtle (indeed muted) tones and values in the life and movement in the canvas. It is in this sense that I speak of 'sensation akin to music.' (Foreword 9)⁹

In *The Dark Jester* the Dreamer says:

My unnerved ... eyes *heard* the cry of the Bird. I had seen the incandescent creature with the nerves of art.... I listened with new ears, new eyes in my Dream. And I heard and saw the strange muted and muffled cry of the Bird in tones, however, that made me gasp. (20–21)

Also, "The fire was so unnerving, so matchless, it created a sound that was *red*, a scarlet sound" (21). And when the Dreamer imagines Atahualpa in Hatun Vilcabamba,

No one and nothing had greeted the Spanish conquistadors when they arrived. Yet Atahualpa was there, I dreamt.... He was there and not there. An emotional body

⁷ On this subject see Peter Egri, "Text in Context – English Literature, Painting and Music: A Comparative Approach." See also Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Writing and the Other Arts in Wilson Harris's Fiction."

⁸ See also "ear sees, eye listens, within a medium of visionary music" (Author's Note 12).

⁹ There is a painting by Aubrey Williams called *Shostakovich Quartet N°7, Opus 108 (Guyana Dreaming 55)*.

was visible to certain eyes. His facelessness was shot through by the colour of music in a Bird's cry. (77)

Clearly then, music is a major element in Harris's fiction and the cross-culturalism he detects in both life and art. It informs his conception of nature, of the human existential process, of the universe and of the relation between all three. He has explained the effect his first encounter with the Guyanese interior had on him:

The shock of contrasts in river, forest, waterfall had registered very deeply in my psyche. So deeply that to find oneself "without a tongue" was to learn of a "music" that was "wordless," to descend into varying structures upon parallel branches of reality, branches that were rooted in a stem of meaning for which no absolute existed. ("When One Dreams" 76)

A great magical web born of the music of the elements is how one may respond perhaps to a detailed map of Guyana seen rotating in space with its numerous etched rivers, numerous lines and tributaries, interior rivers, coastal rivers, the arteries of God's spider ("Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*" 7).

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