

## Introduction

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**T**HE ESSAYS on Wilson Harris's fiction collected in this volume have been written over a period of thirty-five years. They are the expression of my exploration of his work, of my attempt to convey its essence in both content and form and, as far as possible, to enlighten the reader on its meaning and original features. I must confess that when I first approached Wilson Harris's work in the 1960s, my training and commitment to more traditional realist fiction in English made me react like the readers who are disconcerted by his unconventional and unusual writing and turn away from it, a reaction fortunately less frequent now than in those days. For Harris is indeed at present recognized as one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century. In 1968 I attended the second ACLALS conference in Brisbane where Harris was one of the key speakers. If I may presume to make my own the words of Keats in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer":

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken.

I was indeed discovering Guyana, of which I knew nothing, Caribbean, and what was then called Commonwealth, literature, which I only knew through the work of Patrick White and V.S. Naipaul. Above all, I became aware of the extraordinary inexhaustible possibilities of a poetic use of the English language, emerging from an unparalleled imagination.

Wilson Harris has always refused to grant permission to anyone wishing to write his biography, arguing that whatever needs to be known about him is to be found in his work. He himself wrote an autobiographical essay<sup>1</sup> which shows that the few major facts of his life he alludes to have

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, "Wilson Harris," *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series* 16 (Detroit MI: Gale Research, 1992): 121–37. Also published in Joyce Adler, *Exploring the*

been fictionalized in his work. I am thinking in particular of the recurring figure of the beggar inspired by a meeting with a real beggar when he was eight years old; of his reading Homer at the same age; and of the Guyana strike in 1948.<sup>2</sup> However, the most important biographical experience which led him to explore new modes of writing and shaped his vision of art was his work as a hydrographic surveyor for seventeen years, when he led expeditions into the Guyanese interior. He has himself described the impact of the landscapes he discovered in an essay called "A Talk on the Subjective Imagination."<sup>3</sup> Also, in a major interview with Michael Gilkes, he explained the link between language and landscape:

When I first travelled into the rain forest, I realized that I had to visualize the landscape of the Guyanas quite differently from how I had been conditioned to see the landscape on the coastlands [...]. I realized that if I were to write 'the river is black, the trees are green', I would have missed the reality of what lay before me. It was to take a long time for me to immerse myself in that landscape, to sense that there were connections that allowed one to break out of that kind of partial position.<sup>4</sup>

The jungle, with its contrary aspects of "season" and "eternity," is in most of Harris's novels a metaphor for the psyche, its conscious and unconscious components. Like its history, Guyana's landscape has contributed to his dualistic view of existence, but it is its essential mobility and in-

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"*Palace of the Peacock*": *Essays on Wilson Harris*, ed. Irving Adler (Mona, Jamaica: UP of the West Indies, 2003): viii–xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> On this subject, see *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965) and the essays on this novel in the present volume, as well as my study "From Living Nature to Borderless Culture" in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson & George B. Handley (Charlottesville & London: UP of Virginia, 2005): 247–60.

<sup>3</sup> Harris, "A Talk on the Subjective Imagination," *New Letters* 40.1 (1973): 37–48, repr. in *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966–1981*, ed. & intro. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1981): 57–67. Further page references are from the reprint in *Explorations*.

<sup>4</sup> "The Landscape of Dreams," in *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup & Sydney: Dangaroo, 1991): 33–34. Harris told me that he wrote three or four versions of *Palace of the Peacock* before the published one. Unfortunately, these manuscripts are lost. It would have been interesting to examine the evolution of his writing.

stability<sup>5</sup> that have convinced him that a similarly protean quality inheres in the human psyche, its conscious and unconscious components. Whether in content or form (characterization, narrative structure and style) Harris's work is marked by a refusal to invest absolutely in one way of being or one mode of expression. He tends towards the reconciliation of contraries, not definitely, but in evanescent moments of vision within a constantly evolving pattern of separation and union. This partly explains the "unfinished" character of experience, as he presents it, and the lack of resolution in his narratives. His main concern is the creation of community. But despite the unity of being he intuits in all life, he does not think it can ever be finally achieved. As argued in several of his essays, wholeness is unfathomable, and his characters approach it only through a series of partial apprehensions.

Despite their extreme variety in both form and subject-matter, Harris's novels can be viewed as one narrative canvas, at once spiritual biography and unrelenting quest for a new art of fiction inspired by a long-eclipsed native tradition. They are all "novels of expedition" exploring the multi-levelled inner space of the human consciousness, upsetting given categories of being and modifying the characters' (and the participating reader's) mode of perception. From the first Harris offers an alternative to the conventional English novel, and, through the re-creation of the Guyanese experience and of the dispossessed void-like condition of Caribbean man, he enlarges our view of existence and our conception of the human personality.

Because Harris's fiction is unclassifiable, it cannot be imprisoned within clearly defined or categorized literary trends. Insofar as one can allude to his affiliations, I would suggest that he has a lot in common with some modernists, although he has qualified his admiration for T.S. Eliot, questioning in particular his conception of tradition.<sup>6</sup> He is utterly remote from postmodernism, which he considers to be nihilistic.<sup>7</sup> On this subject I refer

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<sup>5</sup> On this subject, see T.J. Cribb, "T.W. Harris – Sworn Surveyor," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28.1 (1993): 33–46.

<sup>6</sup> See "Interview with Kerry Johnson," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 1.1 (Spring 1997): 92.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, "A post-modernism that is bereft of depth or of an appreciation of the life of the intuitive imagination is but a game for a dictatorship of technologies aligned to sophistry and nihilism"; "The Fabric of the Imagination," *Third World*



the reader to the essay entitled “‘Numinous Proportions’: Wilson Harris’s Alternatives to All ‘Posts,’” included in this volume. In a review of *Carnival*, Stewart Brown wrote that “seen in the context of South-American magic-realist tradition Harris’s work is much easier to comprehend, to read [... and he] emerges, rather, as a revolutionary writer, an outrider of the Adamic spirit.”<sup>8</sup> However, Harris’s own response to magical realism is very ambivalent. He admired Alejo Carpentier and Octavio Paz but dissociated himself completely from García Márquez.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he thinks that the label “magical realism” is yet another kind of formula used by adepts of theory to which he strongly objects.<sup>10</sup> In attempting to place Harris as a writer, critics have compared him to Blake, Yeats, T.S. Eliot (as just mentioned), Conrad, Melville, Joyce and Faulkner. As a thinker, he has been linked with existentialism, with Buber and with Jung. He clearly shares with the Romantics the belief that a spiritual reality is to be found within and beyond the phenomenal world. Like them, he wants to arouse a new sensibility among his contemporaries and regenerate their imagination, in Shelley’s words “to quicken a new birth.”<sup>11</sup> But he does not idealize it as, for instance, Coleridge does, in “Dejection. An Ode.” He does not turn it into an absolute but sees it as the source of asymmetric, variable forces. Rather, he has expressed his affinity with Keats’s notion of “negative capability” concretized in the nameless character in several of his novels.

Though universal in its implications, the origin of Harris’s art is, as already suggested, specifically Caribbean, rooted in both Guyana’s landscape and history which, unlike other Caribbean writers, he views as a cause for neither despair nor protest. He does not deny its terrifying episodes, the polarization of Guyana’s heterogeneous population into oppressors and victims, nor the psychological traumas that ensued from con-

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*Quarterly* 12.1 (1990): 86, repr. in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1992): 29.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart Brown, “The Poet as Novelist [...] a Review? *Carnival*,” *Race Today Review* 17.1 (February 1986): 41.

<sup>9</sup> “Interview with Wilson Harris for CAM Project” (11 February 1986, unpublished): 6.

<sup>10</sup> “They [theorists] believe it’s all locked up. There’s a formula, whether they call it magic realism or they call it deconstruction or whatever”; “Interview with Kerry Johnson,” 94.

<sup>11</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind.”

quest, from the dismemberment of peoples, from exile and exploitation. They recur obsessively as individual and universal tragedies in his novels, and throughout his fiction, one feels his passionate concern for those he calls the “Uninitiate.” But he rejects the finality of catastrophe which, he believes, when re-lived and “digested,” offers an occasion for change and renewal. Nevertheless, few writers have analysed with such devastating honesty and imaginative freedom the nature of the world in which we live and the mechanisms by which we react to it, or probed with his visionary insight the complex causes underlying the crisis of civilization in a conflictual and violent twentieth century. 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. Prophetically, in *Carnival*, he denounced “fashionable cults of political violence that become the stuff of new heroic example, especially when such cults may be embalmed to resemble innocence [...] or courage.”<sup>12</sup> Harris’s solution to violence is not political, at least not primarily so, but moral and, with increasing insistence, spiritual, although ultimately, personal conversion must have an impact on social transformation. His work calls for balance between the unacknowledged spiritual resources of the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilized’ peoples as between Third World and First World, and so for an authentic cross-culturalism. It also points indirectly to the possible emergence of a creative solution to the world’s evils from its so-called marginal areas.

Most of Harris’s essays deal with the nature, or what he calls the “fabric,” of the imagination and therefore implicitly with his conception of art, while the majority of his novels self-reflexively illustrate or even discuss it, especially the later ones. Art for him is an all-encompassing creative capacity. Significantly, the protagonists of his later fiction are, such as Anselm in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, multifaceted artists “engineer, sculptor, painter, architect, composer.”<sup>13</sup> One is reminded of Leonardo Da Vinci (who also appears as a character in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*), who was similarly engineer, architect, painter, sculptor, and mathematician. He left many of his works unfinished perhaps because he was more interested in creativity, as Harris is, who conceptualizes it in such notions as “the infinite rehearsal” in the novel of that

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<sup>12</sup> Harris, *Carnival* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985): 88.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990): x.

title and “the unfinished genesis of the imagination”<sup>14</sup> discussed in several of his essays and which applies not only to his own creative writing but to his perception of a continually gestating world and cosmos. Moreover, like Leonardo, Harris is deeply interested in both music and mathematics and the correlation between the two: “Music and numbers were (one sees it now) a revelation.”<sup>15</sup> In his musical practice Leonardo “attempted to produce a convergence between the science of the painter [...], the technique of the engineer [...], and the ideal of the mathematician [...] consubstantially linked.”<sup>16</sup>

In his fusion of the Pagan (retrieved from oblivion) and the Christian/Western traditions Harris sees a way of subverting humanity’s 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 excessively man-centred humanism and “the fallibility of human discourse,”<sup>17</sup> which perceives one aspect of reality only. The creative spirit also accounts for his conviction of the “intact” and “complex reality”<sup>18</sup> at the heart of the universe, and of the many forms of otherness that coalesce in it, that 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 the violence manifest even in man’s 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 prepossessions.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Hence his admiration for Michelangelo’s *Rondanini Pietà*, to be seen in Milan.

<sup>15</sup> *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Boucheron, “Portrait historique d’un génie,” *L’Histoire* 299 (June 2005): 42 (tr. mine).

<sup>17</sup> 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): 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Carnival*, 87, 162.

<sup>19</sup> “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination” (1992), in *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination: Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, ed. A.J.M. Bundy (London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 251.

In a partly autobiographical essay which is also a superb poetic hymn to the livingness of nature Harris talks of “the implicit orchestra of living landscapes when consciousness sings through variegated fabrics and alternations of mood, consonance as well as dissonance, unfathomable age and youth, unfathomable kinships.”<sup>20</sup> Several fundamental elements of Harris’s writing coalesce in this essay: the abstract and the sensuous or, more exactly, the abstract through the sensuous; consciousness, individual, communal and cosmic as it “sings” through both intangible and concrete environmental forms; Harris’s perception of living nature as essentially dynamic, expressing itself in a language of its own like the “whispering trees” that recur in the author’s writing from his early poems, the “singing rocks” in the essay or even in the human language partly acquired from “the sound of the rain falling, from the sigh of the leaves, from the music of the earth as we pressed on it.”<sup>21</sup> The passage also suggests the musical design, at once silent and audible, that Harris hears at the heart of the universe (what Mallarmé called “mobile musical architectures”) and to which he became attuned when voyaging in the Guyanese interior. The concise density of the essay, its paradoxical juxtapositions and associations, typical of much of Harris’s writing, may have been influenced by his scientific training and be partly ascribed to his conviction that, while the language of fiction and the language of science are both partial, they should complement each other:

Even as the language of science differs from documentary frames or linearities, so we must seek in the language of profoundest fiction startling differences from documentary codes.<sup>22</sup>

The originality of Harris’s use of language, the “appropriate form” of his vision, though often considered difficult, is its major characteristic, though it must be pointed out that what some see as the mystery in his writing is not in his own supposedly inaccessible language but is part of the existential process and the complex reality he presents, its inexpressible arche-

<sup>20</sup> Harris, “The Music of Living Landscapes,” in *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination: Selected Essays by Wilson Harris*, ed. A.J.M. Bundy (London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 44.

<sup>21</sup> “The Fabric of the Imagination,” in Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, ed. Alan Riach & Mark Williams (Liège: L3–Liège Language Literature: 1992): 78.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, “The Age of the Imagination,” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 1.2–3 (Spring 2000): 20.

typal and spiritual features. A striking quality of Harris's narratives is the evolution and conversion of metaphors which, by degrees, weave a kaleidoscopic vision of the creative essence. To give an example, "the wind of prayer" in *The Dark Jester* becomes the "wind of art" (62, 66) and thus of imagination which simultaneously infuses a reviving movement into a frozen historical past and into nature. Major characteristics of his prose are its endless capacity for metamorphosis as organizing agent, the mutation of concrete experience it potentializes and the corresponding dynamism of the cosmic, natural, philosophical and even religious dimensions of his fiction. For all its flexibility, the English language has seldom been energized as it is by Harris's "convertible imageries" or stretched to such density of meaning. The convertibility of language in his writing does more than actualize the re-visionary strategies with which his readers are familiar. It is also a feature of his persistently optimistic and hopeful belief in man's capability to disrupt consolidated and tyrannical structures despite his partial perceptions. However, one must refrain from idealizing Harris's metaphors because they are not static and, as he never allows us to forget, they contain an element of terror. In *Jonestown*, Bone applies the bone-flute metaphor, frequently used by Harris, to his relationship with Jones, one of mutuality and terror. He suddenly recalls his "conversion of a primitive morsel into a feast of terrifying conscience within the furies of history."<sup>23</sup> Furies and daemons are inescapable archetypal dual figures in Harris's creative process. Furies, especially as agents of revenge, have "a potency for terror and simultaneously, paradoxically, for the regeneration of cosmic love,"<sup>24</sup> while the daemon is the Greek genius but also has a capacity for evil, as we see in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*.

The religious, the secular, the animal or creature in nature,<sup>25</sup> the vestiges of human experience, their innumerable related facets in the many-layered texture of both life and fiction are aspects of what Harris calls "the

<sup>23</sup> Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996): 18.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, "Apprenticeship to the Furies" (1996), in *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Bundy, 227.

<sup>25</sup> On this subject, see Harris's discussion of Titian's painting "The Allegory of Prudence" in several essays and his comment: "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 that we are"; "The Fabric of the Imagination," in Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, 78.

genius of creation."<sup>26</sup> For Harris, genius is "community-in-creator,"<sup>27</sup> an expression which combines the archetypal multitudinous sources of creativity, the endlessly renewed faces or shapes of all living creatures and nature erupting in the creator/artist. This is illustrated by shifts in narrative voices and by the mutuality between writer and his living subject:

Hope had commenced his book when he met queen Butterfly, the priest had inserted his hand in Hope's when he met the goddess June. And this was a signal of the phenomenon of creativity, linkages between characters and authors, linkages between a painted world that paints the painter even as the painter paints, a sculpted world that sculpts the sculptor as the sculptor sculpts, a written world that writes the writer as the writer writes [...].<sup>28</sup>

In some novels, particularly *Carnival*, Harris alludes to the "genius of love" and in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* to the eruption of "the genie" ("the spark" in *The Tree of the Sun*) as expression of variable, formerly unconscious forces, most eloquently represented in da Silva's revisions of his paintings. In that novel he also clearly conveys the political implications of the artist's creativeness in da Silva's sketch of the Commonwealth Institute's "INSOLUBLE CROSS-CULTURAL DEITY/SOLUBLE UNIFORM" with its dual, interacting composition of *institutional tone/universal non-tone*,<sup>29</sup> the latter one possible representation of collective or, as Harris calls it, the universal unconscious. The phrase epitomizes what he sees as the roots of creativity: adversarial contexts and the collective unconscious, also the sources of consciousness and moral being.<sup>30</sup> "Universal non-tone," the "zero conditions" out of which the narrator in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* hopes that "original vision" will emanate, reminds us that the very origin of the creative momentum, "the indestructible nucleus [...] of creation [...] the very nail of moment in the universe"<sup>31</sup> remains inaccessible.

<sup>26</sup> Harris, *Carnival*, 163.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, *The Tree of the Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978): 64.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993): 147.

<sup>29</sup> Harris, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977): 69.

<sup>30</sup> See Harris, "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity," *New Left Review* 154 (November–December 1985): 124–28.

<sup>31</sup> Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960): 130.

This question has obviously preoccupied Harris from the very beginning.<sup>32</sup> The Unknown, and largely unknowable, itself seems to be the seed of creation, what he has variously called a creative “enigma of Values,”<sup>33</sup> “the riddle of the creator” and “riddles of spirit.”<sup>34</sup>

Harris himself has often explained the creative process as an encounter, an imaginative, endlessly gestating bridge between the unconscious and consciousness in both writer and concentrated reader.<sup>35</sup> Which brings us to dream as creativity or at least as an essential condition in the creative process. In his introduction to *The Four Banks of the River of Space and Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, W.H. explains that he has edited the protagonists’ “dream-book” at their request, while *Jonestown* opens with Francisco Bone’s request itself. Anselm, Hope and Bone emerging from W.H.’s unconscious to offer him the material of his fiction<sup>36</sup> are individualized faces of the “multitude” which, as Bone says, inhabits one.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, it is as if, like the moving beam of a lighthouse, the writer’s consciousness brought successive figures out of the shadows. At the beginning and the end of *Jonestown*, Bone seems at once closer to, yet still distant from, the many-layered reality he is exploring in his “dream-book” than the other two protagonists. One must remember that even the deepest layer of reality, the eruptive life towards which the author and, at another remove, his protagonists progress is not a homogeneous whole but is itself subject to “breaches that invite a strange intercourse of parts that surrender themselves to new associations or the birth of ideas, the re-

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, “Who or what is the creator of man, the human being?” in Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967; London & Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1973): 20. Questions about “who” or “what” lies at the heart of creation recur in *Heartland* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964): 40, 74, 78.

<sup>33</sup> Harris, “The Enigma of Values,” *New Letters* 40.1 (October 1973): 141–49.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, *The Angel at the Gate* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982): 51, 72.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, “Clues in the narrative [...] may surface in a reader’s imagination and throw a bridge from the collective unconscious into the domain of consciousness”; “Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View,” in *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literary Studies – Then and Now; Essays in Honour of A.N. Jeffares*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen & Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1989): 131.

<sup>36</sup> Harris also explained that he was “visited” by one of his characters, who tore up the script of a lecture he was to give and told him to speak spontaneously “out of his vulnerability”; “The Fabric of the Imagination,” in *The Radical Imagination*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Jonestown*, 5.

visionary birth of creativity.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, this is the moving, composite centre at the heart of reality and fiction, which is different from T.S. Eliot’s “still centre.” At the other pole of the encounter, the protagonist follows the dictates of the “living dreamer” within himself. Harris describes this movement towards each other of the erupting, “compositional,” reality and the “living dreamer” in the following terms:

The ‘living dreamer’ in Anselm meets them again [the dead characters whose life he re-creates] as ‘live absences’ or metaphorically sculpted or painted presences. Each metaphoric sculpture or painting subsists on a sensation that flesh-and-blood in the re-creative imagination embodies a correspondence with – and a pregnant distance from – the material a sculptor sculpts, the fabric upon which and with which a painter paints, and that such numinous correspondence and distance provide the narrative substance of Dream with imageries that become ‘live fossil stepping-stones’ into an original space or dimension that is the genesis (curiously unfinished genesis) or infinite birth of the imagination.<sup>39</sup>

“Correspondence with” and “distance from” suggest a precarious balance like that achieved by Bone at the end of *Jonestown*, at once part of the substance and the object of the dream, or the “state of suspension” towards which Harris’s protagonists ceaselessly move. And, as Harris has himself explained, their “floating” between two poles “breach[es] linear bias or storyline function.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the end of the above quotation implies that imagination is both the instrument and a never achieved goal in the making. This explains the variety of titles, conveying different approaches, Harris gives to his many essays on the nature of the imagination. “The Age of the Imagination” does not just mean, as one might think, the age or period in which imagination prevails but its antiquity and agelessness, its ceaseless genesis through an endless “past that leaves its ruined clues” and “each ruin participates in the origins of consciousness.”

The characters’ retracing of their steps towards the ruined past, recovering emotions now understood or perceived in a new light,<sup>41</sup> also

<sup>38</sup> “The Fabric of the Imagination,” in *The Radical Imagination*, 76.

<sup>39</sup> *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Vera Kutzinski, “The Composition of Reality: A Talk with Wilson Harris,” *Callaloo* 18.1 (Winter 1995): 19, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Emotions play a considerable part in the reconstruction of the past. It is not an exclusively psychological, still less an intellectual process.



opens onto Harris's conception of time. He has himself sufficiently insisted on his rejection of linearity. Yet Harris does not ignore calendrical time, stating that even in quantum physics changes occur in "historical time,"<sup>42</sup> and conventional time can usually be reconstructed in his fiction, as is the case in *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, *Companions of the Day and Night* and *Jonestown*. Nor is it simply discarded in favour of timelessness but is, rather, the dimension we live in and through which, when breached, timelessness can be apprehended. Timelessness is not the mere absence of time, either; it is an extra-human dimension with some attributes similar to space with which it interpenetrates. Though Harris says that "there is no absolute beginning,"<sup>43</sup> "no determined beginning, no determined ending,"<sup>44</sup> he does not refer to a static eternity.<sup>45</sup> As there is a "womb of space," so there is a "virgin womb of time,"<sup>46</sup> an "apparent sexuality" to time which plays a "pregnant role."<sup>47</sup> Harris also alludes to an extra-human dimension called living time which he sees "partially" captured in "draperies upon living time" in Aubrey Williams's paintings among others.<sup>48</sup> After the crew have passed "the door of inner perception" in *Palace of the Peacock*, they enter this living dimension which in another context Harris calls time as "native ancestral aboriginal capacity": "they saw and heard only the boiling stream and furnace of an endless life without beginning and end."<sup>50</sup>

The ruptures in conventional time, the shifts between, and blending of, past, present and future coincide with the spatial movements of advance and retreat in many novels, for instance at the end of *Heartland* and *The Tree of the Sun*. It is this movement, excluding any one-directional vision, which informs the characters' "dreaming" experience and makes possible

<sup>42</sup> Harris, "Judgement and Dream" (1989), in Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Jonestown*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Fossil and Psyche* (Austin TX: Occasional Publications, African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, 1974): 10; repr. in *Explorations*, ed. Maes-Jelinek, 79.

<sup>45</sup> "Eternity is unbearable womb of endless progression"; "The Quest for Form," *Kunapipi* 1 (1983): 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Jonestown*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> *Fossil and Psyche*, 2 (in *Explorations*, 68).

<sup>48</sup> "Aubrey Williams," in *Selected Essays*, 222–23.

<sup>49</sup> *Fossil and Psyche*, 2 (in *Explorations*, 68).

<sup>50</sup> *Palace of the Peacock*, 94, 99.

what Harris called "backward resurrection."<sup>51</sup> As with space, Harris's characters sometimes achieve or experience a "state of suspension" between time and timelessness,<sup>52</sup> an ephemeral balance of a psychological, spiritual and aesthetic rather than scientific nature. Indeed, in spite of his many references to modern physics (mainly the quantum view of parallel universes), Harris's original conception of space and time is not limited to the space-time concept; it posits both being and becoming.

Harris's rejection of "an absolute identity to time," admitting of a "double movement between two time-scales,"<sup>53</sup> as in *Eternity to Season*, underlies reversibility, clearly the crux of Harris's narrative oscillations through multi-layered space and time. Reversibility is a key to a cross-culturality rooted, as Harris insists, in the universal unconscious partially represented in forms of art apparently unrelated in space or time (like his frequent paralleling of a Titian painting and Mexico's Quetzalcoatl) but also evident in the "cross-disciplinary vision" of Anselm in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*.

It will be clear, I hope, that the aspects of Harris's work evoked in this introduction are interdependent. Most are evoked in Hope's deeply significant "manifesto of the ship of the globe" in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, characteristically as much question as answer:

'When one descends into breakdown – part-physical, part-mental – and is drawn up into space, what equation exists between the multi-dimensionality of the mind and the multi-dimensionality of the ship of the globe written within one's senses and non-senses? How shall I begin to put it? How shall I translate the untranslatable truth? For me – half-drowned, half-spatial creature (and more, much more I am, less, much less am I) – the equation that exists between metaphors of madness and metaphors of genius is the fluid nucleus of the mystery of truth (neither purely mental – of the body of the mind – nor purely physical – of the spring of the body).'

Hope's manifesto was the language of such nuclearity. He felt an eruption in himself so acute, so dismantling, so reconstructive, it dawned on him that such a mysterious nucleus was the substance of the void of the dumb that had

<sup>51</sup> *The Tree of the Sun*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, "we floated on the mane of time," *Carnival*, 168 or "the inner body of time" through which da Silva achieves a "middle-ground perception in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, 70.

<sup>53</sup> "An interview of Wilson Harris conducted by Hena Maes-Jelinek," *Caribana* 3 (1993): 27.

uttered his name. Mixed metaphoric senses in voice-ness, voicelessness, speech prior to speech, dumbness prior to eloquence.<sup>54</sup>

This passage is a crucial expression of both Harris's philosophy of existence and his vision of culture, counterpointing "the substance of the voice of the dumb" to the dominant voices. In Hope's intuitive progression towards the source of creation, all contraries begin to interact, all partial elements in the existential process: part-physical, part-mental, ascent and descent, one's senses and non-senses, Hope as half-drowned, half-spatial creature, "voiceness" and "voicelessness." As Merleau-Ponty writes,

Our view of man will remain superficial as long as we don't go back to the origin [of expression], as long as we don't recover the primordial silence under the noise of words, as long as we don't describe the gesture which breaks that silence.<sup>55</sup>

The parallel Hope draws between the multi-dimensionality of the mind and the multi-dimensionality of the ship of the globe evokes corresponding partialities within the human person and on the world map. In their representation of such composite reality in inner and outer worlds Harris's narratives move towards a harmonization of elements both within the human person and between cultures, a very different proposition from surface hybridity. It is through this in-depth cross-culturality, this cross-fertilization of old worlds and new worlds, that he has imaginatively opened the way to a new, authentic Caribbean fiction.

I am aware that this book contains many repetitions from one essay to another. This is mainly due to the fact that they were either read at different conferences to different audiences or else written for different journals. Inevitably, then, I felt the need to explain the premisses of Harris's art before examining his separate fictions. In any case, this is not the kind of book one reads from beginning to end. It may, of course, best be consulted for its discussion of specific novels or aspects of Harris's work.




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<sup>54</sup> *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945): 214. Tr. mine.