

## WRITING AND THE OTHER ARTS IN WILSON HARRIS'S FICTION<sup>1</sup>

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[It is necessary] to visualize in new ways. . . subtle links and bridges between the arts and the sciences, between poem and painting, between music and figurations of memory associated with architecture.<sup>2</sup>

**M**y purpose in this essay is to attempt to convey what the global evokes in Wilson Harris's writing, the multifarious forms it encompasses as it inspires and nourishes different artistic modes. As with any concrete or immaterial reality he approaches through a variety of concepts, the global appears in multiple forms of being. It is both macro-

cosm and microcosm, nature and psyche and their measureless depths. It is our world in all its appearances and masks underpinned by a cross-cultural network, and for the narrator in *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, “the abstract globe in one’s head.”<sup>3</sup> It is also the “unfathomable wholeness” at the heart of “the living globe-in-depth,”<sup>4</sup> or put differently, it is the infinite “womb of space” that Harris’s characters ceaselessly explore, the very opposite of any notion of totality with its emphasis on absoluteness. Finally, as suggested in “Imagination Global Imagine,” it is the imagination itself, though never in a homogeneous capacity but stimulated by variable forces.

Harris’s first self-reflexive journey towards wholeness as the enigmatic source of creation is to be found in the MANIFESTO OF THE UNBORN STATE OF EXILE in *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, in which the character Idiot Nameless privileges language as “the medium of the vision of consciousness” :

There are other ways . . . of arousing this vision. But language alone can express . . . the sheer—the ultimate ‘silent’ and ‘immaterial’ complexity of arousal

And further:

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)

Briefly, the state of namelessness or “negative identity” (101) the protagonist has by then reached amounts to an abandonment of the self, of the ego in particular, which enables him to lose himself, as it were, in the condition of the numberless destitute whom he calls the “uninitiate” (103) and in a neglected apparently extinct historical past of victimization. The Well of Silence is the mysterious source that transmutes this condition into art. At this stage, Nameless stops in the “Dark Room of Identity,” (107) also, of course, a room of genesis illustrating Harris’s conviction that death can offer a transition towards rebirth. As Francisco Bone exclaims in *Jonestown*, “One must re-imagine death as a live fossil apparition. Imagination Dead

Imagine.”<sup>5</sup> Gradually, in Harris’s later novels the relation between self and non-self as the mainspring of different kinds of art becomes more prominent in Harris’s fiction. Music and painting were, of course, already incipient compositional elements in *Palace of the Peacock*. If in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* he initiated his metafictional and metaphysical reflexion on the nature of art, by the time he wrote *Companions of the Day and Night*, he had begun to explore in greater depth varieties of artistic modes. In the novels from *The Waiting Room* to *Companions*, it is also becoming clear that man is not the sole creator of art which—this is now a self-evident truth—Harris does not see as a mere imitation of nature, aesthetic recreation of experience or even sole visionary exploration of man’s consciousness. Daemonic and divine, elusive and inexplicable, the creative impulse in his fiction is manifest in the all-pervasive livingness of the gods, nature and men.

In *Real Presences* George Steiner argues that any aesthetic act, however original, is always an *imitatio*, a replication of the inaccessible first *fiat*, “a creative motion always after the first.” “Whatever [their] seeming novelty, . . . [works of art] are ultimately mimetic.”<sup>6</sup> Harris believes in a far more collaborative creativeness between the divine and the human. He does not claim to capture the very origins of creation. But where Steiner asserts that “Even the most innovative, revolutionary text, canvas, tonal composition, arises from something : from the limits of physiology, from the potential of the linguistic or material means, from social-historical ambience,”<sup>7</sup> Harris sees the act of creation as capable of reaching *through* these towards a sheer nothingness that can mutate into somethingness. This mutation is originality. Keeping Steiner’s comment in mind, it doesn’t mean that the artist considers himself as a god. Rather, in the words of Anton Ehrenzweig, whose study, *The Hidden Order of Art* Harris often mentions, “The story of divine creation turns into the story of human creativity.”<sup>8</sup>

In the novel called *Tumatumari* Prudence, the main character,

At first . . . could not cease from trembling . . . but as she shook, vibrations were set up which rippled and fled across the basin of the world-Amazon to orinico-Atlantic to Pacific-a continent bedded in rivers and oceans. It was as if she gained some consolation from reciprocity, from reaction.<sup>9</sup>

The shock she has just received occurred when she saw an eye appear on the Rock-face of the Well. This Eye or IT (83/111), evokes in several novels the nameless reality or dimension, a “spectre of wholeness”<sup>10</sup> within all concrete, psychological or behavioural phenomena. Prudence’s vision into the Eye or crack of stone leads to “*a resumption of the conversation with the muse*” (114), in other words to inspirational sources equally shared by man and nature and, in the context of this novel, buried in history. Harris makes this clear in “The Music of Living Landscape,” where he refers to *Tumatumari* as “sleeping yet singing rocks.”<sup>11</sup> In another essay, after asking “What is art?,” he goes on:

Sculpture appears to have existed long before Man existed in his present evolutionary shape. Out of the turbulence of the Earth the rocks appeared to sculpt bees, insects, animals and Man himself. Man becomes in this long terrain of intuitive shapes . . . a living work of art. . . He resembles the rock-hewn faces of creation which he shares with every creature long before he appears as he now is.<sup>12</sup>

My point is that Harris’s fiction conceives a world in which all forms of existence and experience, all modalities of being or “sentient living entities,” as he says, whether nature, animals or men, open onto an inner complex reality, the “immanent substance” or “archetypal essences”<sup>13</sup> emerging in *The Infinite Rehearsal*. This infinite variety in both concrete world and the subterranean reality that informs it, as well as the fluid metaphorical shifts from one to the other account for Harris’s “new conceptual language”<sup>14</sup> and for the associative method by which appar-

ent incompatibles of all kinds, and not merely the “contrasting spaces” as in the early work, coalesce into a chain of being. If, as Harris has often explained, creation is a two-way process, an encounter between his questing protagonists and the fictional substance emerging from the unconscious, then imagination itself partakes of both worlds. In its “unfinished genesis,” it is both creative capacity and the wholeness that capacity approaches and glimpses if only evanescently. It creates itself while apprehending the other, revealing the all-pervasiveness that holds the world together. In a flash of revelation in *The Four banks of the River of Space*, Anselm, the protagonist, exclaims: “I had missed the subtle linkages of a Parent Imagination in, through and beyond all creatures, all elements, a Parent beyond fixed comprehension.”<sup>15</sup>

And Harris himself about “The Fabric of the Imagination,”

Such a notion arguably implies that there has been a genesis of the imagination within the interstices of unrecorded time, that the unique –indeed inimitable–force of such a genesis imbues the human psyche with flexible and far-flung roots in all creatures, all elements, all worlds and constellations, all sciences, all spaces susceptible to visualisation.<sup>16</sup>

To trace this inimitable force is a challenging paradox through Harris’s fiction in that the protagonist’s approach to the inexpressible is both a “terrifying well-nigh unendurable perspective”<sup>17</sup> and a possible source of ecstasy. There is no ending in conventional terms in his novels but an achievement of vision: in death which, for Harris, is also life-in-death; through disappearance, real or metaphorical, into the third nameless dimension, or through a fall into a state of suspension between extinction and a possible reversal of that fall as experienced by Bone in *Jonestown* and the Dreamer in *The Dark Jester*. Increasingly, after exploring the resources of language<sup>18</sup> to reach that vision, Harris simultaneously investigates the imaginative, self-reflexive power of the other arts as means of “re-sensitizing” the world.

In this respect, *Companions of the Day and Night* could be considered as one of the most global, yet densely concise instalment in his fictional canvas, especially in its striking fusion between science and the arts. We saw that by the end of *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, the narrator's spiritual self-exile had transformed him into Idiot Nameless, now the main character in *Companions*. In his hollow appearance, "eloquent mosaic character composed of inner stains and dyes,"<sup>19</sup> he clearly prefigures Ghost in *The Infinite Rehearsal* and the many-faceted quester in *The Dark Jester*. He seems nevertheless more physically human in his travels and relations with other characters like the virgin/whore and, above all, in a sharpening of the senses giving access to what Mrs Black Marsden calls the ghost within the technicality (75) of different arts. In *Black Marsden* Goodrich realizes that it is possible "to re-sensitize our biased globe into moveable squares."<sup>20</sup> In its sequence, *Companions of the Day and Night*, his edition of the "Idiot Nameless collection" sets in motion a world immobilized in static perceptions of history and of the layers of successful regimes and cultures in Mexico.

One bridge between science and art grows out of Goodrich's awareness that modern man's fear of extinction if the earth were to fall into a black hole of gravity (14) is similar to "pre-Columbian investitures of fear" which made them resort to human sacrifice on the pyramid of the sun to ensure the rebirth of the sun after night. On the second day of his wanderings through Mexico, Idiot Nameless finds himself at the end of a road branching in two directions "science and art":

One branch led into a hole in the ground, into untapped resources of energy or untapped resources of extinguished time, the other into a cloak or body sacrificed to the sun, into the end of time itself or the genesis all over again of light . . . (23)

Both then lead into a subterranean pool of neglected personal, cultural, even cosmic resources and, together, as the Fool reflects,

Were two sides of nameless potentialities . . . that made the shape of each body, each room . . . subtly different to what one thought it was. (23)

These passages imply that the many art forms the Fool reacts to: the pre-Columbian vestiges, the dream-play [a version of Harris's well-known drama of consciousness], the unfinished statue of the Absent Virgin, the fire-eater's many canvases, the monumental statue of the Emperor with which the Fool identifies, becoming a fluid Emperor Rain and leaving behind a passive reflection "devoid of . . . authentic transaction of vision" (60), all these are so many gateways into different cultural periods and catastrophic historical pasts, "the moving squares of the globe" I mentioned earlier entering into a dialogue. Hence Goodrich's comment that "the paintings and sculptures to which the writings related were doorways through which Idiot Nameless moved" (13). It is in this sense, that music, though seldom mentioned in this novel, is nevertheless the expressive medium of the Fool's joint consciousness of catastrophe and its suspension (71). There is also musicality in the variations on a given motif such as the Fool's many descents and ascents, and it modulates the different fragments/days<sup>21</sup> of the narrative, the specific rhythm underlying the Fool's various perceptions of the globe: the cosmos which he envisions when he flies in mid-Atlantic, the "seas, skies, places" (68) of the world, as he journeys through space and in his own mental globe or sphere.

Relating different modes of artistic expression is, of course, not new. Aristotle's *Poetics* with its emphasis on *mimesis* is still influential today.<sup>22</sup> Horace's "Ut pictura poesis," "as in painting so is poetry," and its possible extension to "ut musica poesis" have a long history both in creative attempts to approximate painting or music in poetry and in aesthetic theory.<sup>23</sup> In *The Womb of Space* Harris himself quotes Théophile Gautier who wrote that Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* "[take] color from all palettes and notes from all keyboards."<sup>24</sup> From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards and certainly in the modernist period, many writers attempted to give literature a musi-

cal structure or the texture of the visual arts. Here again, Harris's originality lies in a ceaselessly evolving translation of cross-culturality into the various forms of art woven into the narrative, a process one might call cross- or trans-modality.<sup>25</sup>

In *The Womb of Space* he talks of a "coincidence of the arts" whereby ". . . 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* the artist's daemon reads in da Silva's canvases an "*Ars combinatorial*."<sup>26</sup> The painter is another incarnation of the da Silva who in *Palace* appears to Vigilance as "the frailest shadow of his former self. His bones were splinters and points Vigilance saw and his flesh was newspaper, drab, wet until the lines and markings had run fantastically together."<sup>27</sup> Harris later described this apparition of a man who seems to return from the grave as "inchoate canvas or painting."<sup>28</sup> In *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* he creates himself as an artist as he recreates individual lives and historical episodes since Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe. He prepares for an exhibition paintings that he did seven years earlier and descends into those paintings as Goodrich descended into the Idiot Nameless collection.

In both essays and fiction Harris applies similar "re-visionary strategies" in the quest for wholeness and metamorphosis of a static world. He has explained that when going back to earlier texts, he becomes aware of clues he may have planted in them intuitively, which erupt and suggest an "ongoing, infinite potential as that text appears to move . . . to convert itself into something other than it first seems to be."<sup>29</sup> In *The Eye of the Scarecrow* he fictionalizes this method and adumbrates his concept of "infinite rehearsal" when the narrator refers to a childhood incident whose significance he did not immediately grasp:

little though I knew it this was to prove a life-time's poetry of science and a stubborn terrifying task. It was to prove the re-living of all my life again and again as if I were a ghost returning to the same place (which was always different), shoring up different ruins (which were always the same). (25)

In *Da Silva da Silva*:

As he returned to each painting again and again as varieties of transparent eclipse, he began to observe an implicit bank there in that a deep-seated mutation of tone rose into each canvas and one saw a spirit there as one *sees* a never-to-be-painted, never-to-be-trapped, light or element on earth.

It was this contrast between uniform cloak and mutation of tone born of suppressed resources that filled him now . . . with a sense of original independence *through* himself, through each failed canvas across the years. (38)

One also finds in *The Eye's* "Manifesto" and at the core of da Silva's re-vision of his paintings a common primordial fountainhead of creation, at once source of inspiration and object of re-envisioning, which in his series of paintings da Silva sees as "an unfathomable coherence through each trackless universe, trackless wilderness" (38).

The global in this narrative is being shaped into its multi-layered texture. As da Silva "unravels self-portraits of fate" (50) in canvases painted seven years before,

'Truth flashes through the Magellan mask, the Cuffey mask, that I wear; a naked spark of truth that lingers, a glimpsed compassion, an *original unity* that runs with conformable institutions but is other than uniform style, uniform paint, uniform conviction.' (50, my emphasis)

The compassion, rebirth of emotion and sensibility da Silva detects in his paintings emerges from a dialogue, among others, between Magellan who opened the way to the European conquest of the world and Cuffey, a revolutionary victim of that conquest. The coming together of the world's disparities culminates in da Silva's highly original use of the architecture of the Commonwealth Institute in London as a metaphorical globe. He sketches a line of *tone* representing institutional uniformity and a line of *universal non-tone* or never-to-be-painted beauty and compassion (69), the two meeting at the apex of the Commonwealth tent. In his painted voyage through the

tent he moves through a “wilderness” globe, which nevertheless elicits “the glimmering light of a perception of value beyond the quantitative mirage of civilisations” (74). This vision of hope is matched by his relation with his wife whom he calls “Jenine Gold, Jenine Globe, where masked populations reside” (5). When he meets her on her way home and she announces that she is pregnant “he encircled her fleecy coat” and in doing so, “[h]e encircled the globe then, a global light whose circulation lay through and beyond fear into unfathomable security” (77).

Jen’s news of the coming child is, as Harris said elsewhere, an “annunciation of humanity”<sup>30</sup> in a dying age and a crisis of civilisation which calls for a rebirth of moral conscience and a move towards an all-encompassing vision of all the resources available to man that could blend into a dynamic liberation of static mental structures. The muse’s pregnancy is also an annunciation of the “renascence of the arts.”<sup>31</sup> It occurs in the last chapter of *The Tree of the Sun*, a sequence to *Da Silva da Silva*, in which the painter’s art is an even more far-reaching medium of fertile recreation of the past and a self-reflexive scrutiny of the artist’s role. The ending is a strikingly dense, metaphorical composition interweaving inner and outer world: earth, sea, sky reaching out into the cosmos; living and dead characters and their spiritual relation; man’s long evolutionary history imprinted with traces of its animal past. In other words, all spheres of being cohere into the ship of the globe with which a newly created community or “human orchestra” (94) begins to move. A brief passage will give an idea of how this interweaving affects the language of the novel. Da Silva expresses his attachment to Jen and their coming offspring but is reticent about the burden of his spiritual relation with the woman whose life he is recreating:

Their climax made him suddenly confused . . . at the dividing line between spirit and creation. His tools sang nevertheless, painter’s brush and sculptor’s hammer, singing flesh of a bird, the spirit of a bird. There was the rhythmic stab of a sculptured song, there was a sound of soundless crying, as the songbird lit in her body and in-

serted its beak into her flesh, into his flesh, into a piercing musical wire. (74)

Harris’s vision in this novel identifies the creation of community with “the very art of creation” as a “heterogeneous enterprise” (63), in which poetry, painting, sculpture coincide, though music comes increasingly to the fore as a unifying essence and agent of “the . . . ‘silent’ and ‘immaterial’ complexity of arousal,”<sup>32</sup> especially in *The Carnival Trilogy* and *The Dark Jester*.

I must restrict my comments on music to some brief concluding remarks, hopefully congruous with its renewed significance in Harris’s latest novels. Already in *Palace of the Peacock* Carroll’s music or “organ cry” in “break[ing] and mend[ing] itself always,”<sup>33</sup> epitomizes the pivotal movement of all Harris’s narratives: dismemberment/re-memberment; ruin/origin; Death/resurrection. Music is fluid, intangible, uncapturable and capable of merging dissonant components, all features Harris sees in the “inimitable ground of being” – or wholeness – which in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* “gather[s] up . . . all that has[s] been experienced in every condition of existence” (51). Whereas painting and sculpture capture the outer world and give access to its inner complex reality, the role of music, apart from the stylistic variations I briefly referred to in connection with *Companions of the Day and Night*, is at least twofold, especially in *Four Banks* and *The Dark Jester*.

In *Four Banks*, particularly, it is a link or connecting thread between outer and inner spheres, between successive layers of reality, for example in the joint performance of flute and scale or ladder when the (diagrammatic) voice of the flute ascends from the abyss through “the flesh of the elements,” “the Fossil ancestors” (46-47), giving voice to “the spirits of the living and the dead” (45). It is therefore a relating agent within the globe as well as a linkage between different forms of art in the narrative. One can apply to music Emmanuel Lévinas’s saying that “the essence of language is its relation to the Other.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed language and music are “antiphonal discourses” (xii) in Anselm’s dream-book. On one level, the Other here is the

Amerindian, in particular three drowned Macusi children. More generally, it is the wholeness or “immanent substance” which Harris has translated into a great variety of terms in his fiction and criticism. Music animates the components of this wholeness. As “music of genesis,” it captures the very movement of creation and pervades the globe with “spatial rhythms . . . one seldom listens to” (8). At one stage Anselm and his companions do listen to “fire-music” in a waterfall in the forest:

We had entered it seemed . . . an innermost chamber of the magical Waterfall beneath god-rock. It encompassed the globe, the ancient world, the modern world. As if the Waterfall had been uplifted from the river and transferred within us in the music of space, around us in Shadow-organ imperceptible . . . dance of genesis. (133)

The dance of genesis that informs Harris’s global imagination.

## NOTES

1. This paper was read at a conference in honour of Wilson Harris, which took place at the University of Newcastle, UK, on 11 May 2002. The theme of the conference was “Imagination Global Imagine.” It was first published in its original form in *Commonwealth. Essays and Studies. Places of Memory* (Dijon: Université de Bourgogne, 2003), 17-26. This is a revised version.
2. Wilson Harris, “The Life of Myth and its Possible Bearing on Erna Brodber’s fictions *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and *Myal*, *Kunapipi*, XII, 3 (1990), 86-92; 87.
3. Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 75. Further references are given in the text.
4. Wilson Harris, “Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination,” in *Explorations. A Selection of talks and essays 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), 99.
5. Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber & Faber), 232.
6. George Steiner, *Real Presences. Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 201-204.
7. *Real Presences*, 201-202.

8. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art. A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (1967; Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1971), 210.
9. Wilson Harris, *Tumatumari* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 112. Other references in the text.
10. Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 2.
11. Wilson Harris, “The Music of Living Landscape,” in *Selected Essays. The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 45.
12. Wilson Harris, “The Power of the Word in Space and Place,” forthcoming.
13. On this subject see Noel Cobb, *Archetypal Imagination. Glimpses of the Gods in Life and Art* (New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1992).
14. C.G.Jung refers to “a unity of being which would have to be expressed in terms of a new conceptual language,” in *Synchronicity. An Acausal Connecting Principle*, trans. R.F.C.Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 133.
15. Wilson Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 125. Further references are given in the text.
16. Wilson Harris, “The Fabric of the Imagination,” *Third World Quarterly*, 12.1 (January 1990), 175-186, 175.
17. *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 96. In *The Four Banks of the River of Space* Harris speaks of “the unbearable divine,” 9.
18. See Susan’s log-book in *The Waiting Room*, Victor’s poems in *Ascent to Omai* or Goodrich’s “Book of Infinity” in *Black Marsden*.
19. Wilson Harris, *Companions of the Day and Night* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 81. Further references are given in the text.
20. Wilson Harris, *Black Marsden (a tabula rasa comedy)* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 66.
21. On this subject, see Pierre François, “The Lapsarian Ascent,” in his excellent study, *Inlets of the Soul. Contemporary Fiction in English and the Myth of the Fall* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 255-289.
22. See Pierre Somville, *Essai sur la poétique d’Aristote et sur quelques aspects de sa postérité* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J.Vrin, 1975).
23. Henryk Markiewicz, “Ut Pictura Poesis . . . A History of the Topos and the Problem,” *New Literary History* 18.3 (Spring 1987), 535-557.

24. Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space. The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 90. Further references in the text.
25. See Harris's essay, "Aubrey Williams," in which he speaks of "the music of colour orchestrated in [Williams's] canvases . . . Painted space 'speaks' to the 'ear.'" *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 2.1, 2 & 3 (Spring 2000), 26-30, 26.
26. Wilson Harris, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 44. Further references are given in the text.
27. Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960; London: Faber & Faber, 1998), 95-96.
28. Unpublished interview with Hena Maes-Jelinek, August 1981.
29. Wilson Harris, "Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View," in *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, 127-140, 135.
30. Wilson Harris, "The Quest for Form," *Kunapipi* 5.1 (1983), 21-27; 22, 27.
31. Wilson Harris, *The Tree of the Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 24, 69, 83, 87. Further references are given in the text.
32. *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 95.
33. *Palace of the Peacock*, 113.
34. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 227. Trans. mine.