

---

## From Living Nature to Borderless Culture in Wilson Harris's Work

*Hena Maes-Jelinek*

Many believe that there is a firm and irreconcilable barrier between person and environment. Whereas I see the environment as a measure of reflection in the person, a measure of the cosmos in the person . . . We need . . . to scan with subjective eyes landscapes/oceanscapes/riverscapes and the elements within these for complex reflections or absent/present creatures and beings.

—Wilson Harris, "Age of the Imagination"

THIS EPIGRAPH on the interaction or "mutuality" between the environment and the human person epitomizes Wilson Harris's perception of man's place in the universe as well as the historical and philosophical implications he developed in his fiction after the revelation of "absent/present creatures and beings" he experienced on his expeditions as a surveyor in the heartland of Guyana. In an early essay, he explained how the eruption of a "constellation of images" from the depths of a dangerous river affected his mode of feeling, of thinking, and, most important, of writing: "I felt as if a canvas around my head was crowded with phantoms and figures. I had forgotten my own antecedents—the Amerindian/Arawak ones—but now their faces were on the canvas . . . There was a sudden eruption of consciousness ("A Talk on the Subjective Imagination" 40–41). Harris is clearly saying here that his sudden awareness of his Amerindian ancestry made him also conscious of the historical significance of the pre-Columbian resurrecting, as it were, into the present. In a talk given in 1998, he insisted again on the impact of the living landscape on his perception of an essence, later called "bloodstream of spirit" (interview, D'Aguiar 76), pervading and animating both natural elements and men:

I became aware of a vibrant, secret life in the arteries or branches or scales in landscapes, riverscapes, oceanscapes, skyscapes. That life differed from the human pulse but it gave range, mystery, cross-culturality, unique music, to the language in which I wrote. From my first expedition into the deep interior, in which I felt I had arrived on a new planet, I was drawn to consider and re-consider the

reality of consciousness, the eruption of the unconscious into the subconscious from the heart of a stone, or a branch, or “a sigh out of the gloom of the trees, unlike any human sound as a mask is unlike flesh and blood.” (“Introduction to *Palace of the Peacock*” 1)<sup>1</sup>

This passage makes three important related points about landscape: that it is not passive or mute but alive with a “pulse” and a language of its own; that it is a prime mover to consciousness; and that its secret life underpins Harris’s fictional language with cross-culturality and, as he says elsewhere, “wordless music.” From his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), cross-culturality was not only the major feature in his conception of Caribbean culture—which is obvious enough in the light of the area’s history and social formation represented in the narrative—but it was and still is the substance of his universalist apprehension of humanity. It informs his view of the connections between man, nature, and the animal world and his dissent from the dogma of anthropocentrism, and it shapes his original style. Strangely enough, it was Harris’s immersion in a nonhuman environment, sparsely peopled by small groups of Amerindian survivors, that made him aware of the deficiencies of Caribbean culture and of cultural patterns generally. The powerful contrasts in a landscape “potently alive, potently still” (interview, D’Aguiar 76), its free movements and constant metamorphoses, its paradoxical unpredictability—like the Atlantic tides pushing upstream and running counter to the normal flow of the river as described in *Genesis of the Clowns* (1977, 115) or the “geological upward displacements of the ocean tides” in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990, 35)—aroused by comparison his perception of the fixed values and hierarchies in Caribbean society and made him reject literary realism and what he called “progressive realism” in technology and politics.

In each novel of *The Guyana Quartet* (1960–63), the multilayered jungle is a place of revelation. From the very beginning of the voyage upriver in *Palace*, the narrator identifies the map of Guyana with his own body and realizes that nature, itself frequently humanized, is pregnant with invisible presences: “Formidable lips breathed in the open running atmosphere . . . [the crew] bowed and steered in the nick of time away from the evasive, faintly discernible unconscious head whose meek moon-patch heralded corrugations and thorns and spears we dimly saw in a volcanic and turbulent bosom of water . . . The silent faces and lips raised out of the heart of the stream glanced at us” (32–33).

Similarly, in the three other novels, the protagonist apprehends a neglected or eclipsed reality, part of the country’s historical legacy, buried in a dense

environment, and with which the Guyanese must come to terms. The *Quartet* outlines the foundations of a cultural approach that becomes increasingly obvious with each installment of the author’s fictional opus.

The density of the jungle as catalytic agent of consciousness is further explored in *Heartland*, which blends with an extraordinary suggestive power the spells of terror of the lonely traveler in the interior, the fear of what this experience might make him discover in his inner self, and the existential anguish that “there might be nothing at all within the storehouse of the heartland” (28), and one might get lost in a godless, meaningless world, though he later discovers that the resources of the heartland are spiritual and intangible. For the first time, moved by the prevailing mysterious atmosphere, Harris’s protagonist asks the metaphysical question of “who” or “what” there might be at the heart of the phenomenal universe. There is no definite answer to that question but rather a twofold intimation that all living beings become “their own shadowy essence” (43) after death and that a “process of relations” (42) informs each person’s inner life and the course of all existence. These are major elements in a “wholeness” always in the making as, I hope, will become clear below.

Harris’s novels so far had evoked latent manifestations of the spirit of place mainly through his characters’ reactions to the phenomenal world, their sense of an enigmatic presence in the landscape.<sup>2</sup> In *The Secret Ladder*, it took a human form when Poseidon appeared to Fenwick and addressed him in “the silent accents of an ageless dumb spirit (370–71). In *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), the re-creation of the nameless protagonist’s journey into the jungle captures in minute detail the free movements and the obstacles in the flow of life in both outer and inner space, nature and human psyche. For the first time, this self-reflexive narrative identifies Harris’s conception of the art of fiction and the regenerative power of the imagination (adumbrated in *Palace*) with the progress of the individual soul toward an open and dynamic condition, or “negative identity” (101), free from the “fixed instincts” (58), or habits of thought and behavior in a static society, which he opposes to a “new map of the fluid role of instinct” (76). Harris’s concept of “negative identity”<sup>3</sup> developed from his conviction that the construction of a positive Caribbean social and cultural future first requires a psychological descent into, and digestion of, the traumatic historical dismemberment and negation of the self that most West Indians experienced rather than a politics of protest such as the Guyana strike of 1948 re-created in the novel.<sup>4</sup> Again, nature offers the model and poetic image that stimulate the narrator toward a recognition of ebb and flow in the existential process (life-in-death, death-in-life) and

of the eclipsed victims in Caribbean society. "A ripple, a footprint almost, appeared in the middle of the water and vanished . . . *The dazzling sleeper of spirit*, exposed within the close elements . . . awoke all too suddenly and slid, in a flash, like speechless gunfire . . . vanishing into a ripple, a dying footfall again . . . and rising once more, distinct web and trace of animation upon a flank of stone. (48–49; my emphasis)

Raven's Head, the mining ghost town that the nameless narrator and his companion try to reach, is subject to a similar movement, as one of the "mysterious locations [that] had been plumbed to disappear and return once more into the undisclosed astronomical wealth of the jungle" (54). Harris clearly associates here what he calls "spirit" with the "undisclosed astronomical wealth of the jungle" and with all who people the so-called void of Caribbean history, to him an apparent void only.<sup>5</sup> These fluctuations of appearance and disappearance initiate the general structure of Harris's narratives and of his opus as a whole. They develop through movements inspired by the animated configuration of the environment, an alternation of eruption from, and dying again into, apparent nothingness discernible in the interweaving of life and death, of blindness and insight in man's consciousness, in the ebb and flow of emotions. Similarly, in the open-ended canvas of his fiction, characters disappear to reappear in later novels like one of the Da Silva twins, who vanishes from the narrative in *Palace of the Peacock* but turns up again and dies in *Heartland*, then is resurrected in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977) and *The Tree of the Sun* (1978).

In his excellent chapter "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Poeticism,"<sup>6</sup> Paget Henry contrasts two cultural traditions in the Caribbean, one poeticist—to which Harris belongs—which, in the construction of a new Caribbean self, focuses on ego/consciousness relations, whereas the historicist tradition favors ego/society relations. Henry locates the difference between the two in "the ontology of character in the novel" (110) and writes that, for Harris, "the transformation of the postcolonial ego is a precondition for postcolonial reconstruction" (110). This is the usual opposition between the philosophical conviction that individual moral progress will eventually bring about social progress and the Marxist/sociological tenet that better institutions will help produce better individuals. Henry is right to argue that "in the case of Harris, the mythopoetics of ego/consciousness relationship replaces a historicized political economy as the grammar of human self-formation" (111). Nevertheless, history is more important in the Harrisian self-formation than Henry makes out; the void in consciousness that, as he rightly points out, precedes self-formation was originally

induced by history. This is eclipsed but revived in all the novels, as we see in, among others, *Tumatumari* (1968), *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), and *Jonestown* (1996), where "history retrieves an emotionality, a passion to unveil the facts" (46). Additionally, Henry makes little or no difference between consciousness and imagination when he writes that "Harris refers to the unity of [the] textuality of consciousness as 'the fabric of the imagination'" (*Caliban* 105) and that "consciousness . . . is immortal in its temporality and infinite in its creative possibilities" (*Caliban* 96). The two are indeed closely intertwined, and there is no doubt that Harris gives consciousness the paramount role that Henry describes in the ego formation since all his protagonists are involved in a "drama of consciousness" (*Tradition* 55). But consciousness is, I believe, the purpose of their quest spurred on by the imagination, which is both creative capacity and the all-pervasive uniting force that holds the world together. As Harris wrote: "The key word for me as a writer is *imagination*. One is involved in *imagined natures, imagined sciences, imagined arts*" ("Voyaging Imagination").

A major feature in Harris's work is the close link between all aspects of his writing or what is actually a connecting thread running through them. "*Imagined natures . . . imagined arts*" reminds one that the environment is for him a "living text": "The landscape is alive . . . it is a living text. And the question is, how can one find, as an imaginative writer, another kind of living text which corresponds to [it]. There is a dialogue there between one's internal being, one's psyche, and the nature of the place, the landscape" (Gilkes, "Landscape of Dreams" 33). In other words, Harris was urged by the need to find "a new conceptual language"<sup>7</sup> to match his perception of living nature and interpret a culture that should itself be animated by a similar livingness: "How does one combine with, and transfigure, a cultural fixity that passes for action ingrained into one's education? How does one bring into play—through various aspects and layers—a sense of profoundest cross-culturality beyond the immobility of habit or of virtue that exterminates all unlike itself?" (interview, D'Aguiar 76).

Harris's way of "bring[ing] into play . . . a sense of profoundest cross-culturality" is through his concept of the "living text" of nature as a "womb of space." This is his expression for outer landscape, inner multi-layered psyche, the seat of the "non-verbal arts of the imagination"<sup>8</sup> (*Womb of Space* xix) and a metaphor for the expanding consciousness. Just as the environment is pregnant with endless evolutionary possibilities, so is the person's inner being. Both enrich and partake of the "complex reality" (*Carnival* 87) of which the external world offers an endless

variety of manifestations. Hence his assertion that “Plural masks imply a living cosmos in all its grain and particularity that may appear to sleep, to be dormant but is susceptible to riddling proportions of eruptive life” (“Quetzalcoatl” 39). Conversely, this subterranean existential flow, or, as he says, “unfathomable wholeness” (interview, Tiffin 24) is continuously nourished by the partial environmental phenomena and existences that merge into it as they die and become “the residue of experience we all share” (*Explorations* 43), the “shadowy essence” mentioned above. This confirms the importance of history, particularly the experience of conquered peoples, as an intrinsic, ineradicable component in the human unconscious.

These formulations of an ontological, philosophical, and moral nature, as well as the concept of a cross-culturality rooted in the “womb of space,” were expressed gradually in essays in which Harris retrospectively analyzed his own creative process repeatedly described as intuitive.<sup>9</sup> To take but one example: before he wrote any of his critical comments on Caribbean culture, Carnival—a typical Caribbean event—metaphorically epitomized the “plural masks” of external reality and their connection to an inner source of being from *Palace of the Peacock* to *Tumatumari*. Its accretions of meanings from one novel to another until *The Carnival Trilogy*<sup>10</sup> illustrate a method one could sum up as revision of “intuitive clues” (“Validation of Fiction” 45).

Intuition in Harris’s work is not an exclusively human faculty but a “living spark”<sup>11</sup> of creation operating in both the environment and all living creatures, with men, animals, and gods all partaking of the “measureless fluid life of the earth” (“Theatre” 3). This fluid life informs Harris’s conception of the arts and of a nonstatic culture. It also generated a style developing through what he later called “convertible imageries” (*Guyana Quartet* 10), protean metaphors also inspired by the language of the landscape. He writes: “Language possesses resources which one has to sense as coming not only from within oneself, but from outside, from the land itself, from the rivers, from the forest. And also from those persons and those cultures that existed in the landscape and have left their trace” (Gilkes, “Landscape of Dreams” 33).

*Tumatumari* admirably combines the language of the land, the eloquent presence of “persons and . . . cultures” who left their trace in the landscape, and a revision of history issuing into a vision of a more dynamic culture and what Harris calls a “treaty of sensibility” (104, 109) between nature, humanity, and the social fabric. The novel covers the history of one family and of Guyana from the end of World War I to the late 1960s.

Both space and time are fragmented and reassembled in the memory and developing consciousness of the main character, Prudence,<sup>12</sup> who transfigures in retrospect the experience of her family, particularly of her father, Tenby, a historian, and her husband, Roi, an engineer. Both men knew that Guyana’s natural environment and a social order born of oppression required a complete change of former policies. Yet out of self-interest and fear, they steeled themselves against their insights and better judgment. The real upsurge of consciousness occurs in both of them as they die—Roi in the waterfall,<sup>13</sup> Tenby on his deathbed when he remembers his guilt for allowing another daughter, Pamela, to act according to the “pattern of conquest, of history as [he] had accepted it, lived it and written it” (60). Culture, then, is predominantly the kind of worldview and behavior that counters “the immobility of habit or of virtue that exterminates all unlike itself” (quoted above). It is an awakening to the mutable realities in both nature and society.

Such an awakening takes place in the novel. *Tumatumari* means “sleeping rocks,” though rocks that prove “convertible” (26), like the “*lapis* of populations” (22, 26) turned to stone after conquest: “Painted figures issuing from a crack in the fastness of an age, the well of time. Sleeping rocks . . . Crying to her to be born again (expelled from the bandage of history towards a spiral of ‘vision’” (49).

Space is lacking to develop the multilayered meaning of this dense novel, in which the life and resources of nature generate Prudence’s psychical “drama of conception” (41) as she re-lives and envisions the redeeming potential of her father’s missed opportunities. There is an interpenetration of character and landscape into which she eventually drowns after achieving, through her re-creation of her family’s past, a “[t]ranslation of the Gorgon of history” (155):

The glare of the sky above the river made her partially close her eyes until her long lashes were strokes of colour, green and orange, purple and red—the attenuated branch of a tree whose long exploding arm reached across her. With a slight backward tilt of the head she could discern a dense shoulder of forest approaching her, bones of sunlight. . . . An enormous excitement gripped her—authenticity—in which *her being, the being of the well, the being of the sky* seemed to enfold itself and yet release itself like the unravelling, ravelling petals of a flower. (29–30; my emphasis)

The image of awakening rocks or “sentient earth-sculpture[s]” (“Theatre of the Arts” 6) is further developed from *Tumatumari* to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*. In the former novel, “she discerned upon the features

of Rock an eye appear" (111) and gradually felt encircled in a "fantastic reciprocity of elements" (114). In *Four Banks*, the rocks in the waterfall also come alive, and Anselm, the protagonist, witnesses "a procession of draped bodies . . . rock sculptures that harness the river. The Macusis see them . . . as clothing inner bodies that wait to come alive, a living procession . . . a magical art born of 'live absences', a magical procession of living interior bodies sculpted at the heart of the Waterfall" (33–34).

Later, Anselm himself becomes "genuinely involved . . . in uplifted veil upon veil of darkness until [he] possessed a glimmering apprehension of the magic of creative nature, the life of sculpture, the genesis of art, the being of music" (39).

These passages clearly associate the creativeness of nature arising from an invisible, mysterious source (the "bloodstream of spirit" mentioned above) with humankind's creativity, which Harris never sees as an imposition of order on the so-called chaos of life. Art to him (and to his "dreaming" artist-protagonists) consists in capturing the free motion of elements in outer and inner landscape, in surrendering the self to this motion and thus allowing an untrammelled narrative structure to emerge into his consciousness. But the connection between outer landscape and inner psyche, the interweaving of these many-layered worlds, which Harris calls "composition of reality" ("Composition of Reality" 23), cannot be seized absolutely, only glimpsed through a multiplicity of images.

Harris has always attempted to merge the "two cultures" (art and science) and advocated a revolution in the humanities analogous to the shift from Newtonian to quantum physics. Plurality in both nature and man ("one is multitude" [*Jonestown* 5]), the notion of alternative or "parallel universes" (*Jonestown* 110), the rejection of all absolutes in favor of interconnected partialities, the dissolution of boundaries between life and death as between past, present, and future, all partake of a quantum approach to life developing through Anselm, the narrative medium and many-sided artist. He is indeed an "engineer, sculptor, painter, architect, composer" (x); another way of suggesting the multiplicity of art forms arising from a unified cross-cultural source. He gathers within himself and probes all these partial realities.

Like Anselm, Francisco Bone in *Jonestown* is "a vessel of composite epic" (5) in whose "Memory Theatre" and consciousness is reenacted the terrible Jonestown massacre that took place in Guyana on 18 November 1978.<sup>14</sup> Seven years later, Bone, who survived the massacre, remembers the day of the mass suicide and killings but also travels back to 1939 on

the eve of World War II, when his mother was killed by a Carnival reveler disguised as a tiger, a recurring image in Harris's fiction. Thus contextualized in an individual act of violence (the mother's murder) and an impending holocaust, so representative of twentieth-century atrocities, the massacre is also paralleled with the extinction of pre-Columbian populations and civilizations and the mysterious disappearance of the Caribs in British Guiana suggesting that the Guyanese interior is also the seat of eclipsed cultures. But the setting here frequently extends from the Guyanese heartland to the cosmos and a vision of "archetypal oceans and skies" (51), a spatial arena in keeping with the Jonestown leaders' "celestial ambition" (52) to emulate the great conquerors of the past. The narrative analyzes the seldom-disclosed motivations of destructiveness and, among all of Harris's novels, is probably the one most concerned with the persisting tendency in men, even by resorting to genocide, to eliminate those different from themselves.

In spite of distinctly political motivations in his representations of tyranny, Harris's answer to these disasters is neither social nor political but moral and cultural. In his backward and forward psychological journey in the "womb of space and time," Bone traces "[a] map of the imagination that breaches the human-centered cosmos we have enshrined" (6). This breakthrough occurs through many different narrative features. One is the redeeming agency of the Virgin/Fury archetype. In classical European mythology, the furies were vessels of the revenge-syndrome, punishing doers of unavenged crimes.<sup>15</sup> As usual in Harris's fiction, the archetype cannot be apprehended in its wholeness and is broken into several personae,<sup>16</sup> women in the narrative being both concrete characters and partial faces of the archetype. One facet of the Virgin archetype is blended with a pre-Columbian approach to nature and men inspired by Maya culture and iconography.<sup>17</sup> Harris has drawn attention to a pre-Columbian tradition that implied "a profound and unusual treaty of sensibility between human presence on this planet and the animal kingdom" ("Imagination, Dead" 185). In this novel, as later in *The Dark Jester*, he borrows from that tradition the representation of natural and animal features in human faces. For instance, the predator in the novel, of which Jones is only one facet, is frequently represented as a tiger or jaguar, while the sun in Harris's fiction stands for a will-to-power and arrogance that can be broken and converted.<sup>18</sup> Thus when Bone builds the Virgin ship on which he travels (clearly a vessel of the voyaging imagination), he plucks the first nail of his ship "from the sun, from the tiger's killing weapon," and draws from

Jones “a fiery claw.” Hence in his imaginative return to his childhood: “I sailed on the convertible claw of the sun as if I rode futuristic energy on the back of a tiger” (26–27).

Harris’s expression “the womb of space and time” obviously identifies woman with the concrete nature in which his characters travel, while she is also the containing vessel of men’s self-exploration. Bone’s mother, another incarnation of the Virgin archetype, is equally the “mother of humanity” who bears the resurrection child. When in his dream-book he hears his mother say, “One needs to break the charisma of conquest in oneself if one is to build a new Virgin ship,” he ponders over the role of the furies, and at the end of his “epic of repentance” he sees in the Virgin archetype an expression of “the rhetoric of intercourse with reality shorn of violence” and a “transgression of frames of terror” (227).

The violence that led to the Jonestown massacre takes on many forms in the novel, among them the violence done to nature and sexual violence. The instinct of the predator in human, animal, and archetypal condition is an inescapable temptation that Bone himself shares and a menace. But he later perceives that violence, which has also been exerted on women by Jones, can be converted into a redeeming sexuality in both human beings and nature: “The act of penetration of space, of Virgin space, penetration of other worlds, was not in its mysterious origination an act of violence. It was an act of creation . . . of living diversities, the living orchestration of differing spaces, ages, realities” (128).

In a striking passage, Bone has a vision of an “incalculable spatial episode” (133), an intercourse between a log turned phallic tree and a “genesis cloud . . . in the womb of space” (132).<sup>19</sup> It enables him to visualize the possible rebirth of the pre-Columbian New World drowned like Plato’s Atlantis, by the European conquest “in every mutilated landscape and catchment and lake”: “The fate of Atlantis was laid bare as a counterpoint between rape or devastation and implicit freedom still to balance extinction with a renaissance . . . of lost cultures whose vestiges and imprints could be orchestrated into the seed of the future” (136).

Nonviolent intercourse breaks the closure of eternity as conceived by Jones and at one stage by Deacon, Bone’s friend and “adversarial twin,”<sup>20</sup> who saw himself “duel[ling] with eternity” . . . the Titans, the Tricksters of heaven” (52). The trickster, who frequently appears in Harris’s fiction, is an ambivalent mythological Caribbean figure who embodies the divine, the animal (derived from the African spider god Anancy), and the human as the slave who eludes oppression by his cleverness. Harris also presents him

as an artist who identifies “with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples” (*History* 17).<sup>22</sup>

It is in this latter capacity, and not as god or the gods Deacon wants to confront,<sup>23</sup> that the trickster appears in *The Dark Jester* (2001) and dialogues with the Dreamer/narrator. The novel recreates the colonial encounter between Pizarro and the last pre-conquest Inca, Atahualpa. It is informed by the contrast between the cultures the two men represent while construing a worldview that counterpoints “a dominant cultural history” (102). Re-creating the meeting, the protagonist’s dreaming psyche liberates it from history’s closures into a natural, even cosmic dimension “across times” and relativizes man’s position in the universe:

Other facets, other faces, other sides to nature begin an immense liberation in breaking absolutes into partial organs. . . . Atahualpa . . . wears a garment of fire, ghostly spark of fire . . . which I partially understand . . . [a]s much and less than I understand the fleeting garment a bird wears when it sings and articulates a strand of greatest music, or a serpent whose wisdom is voiceless but wiser than the symbols of Eden, or a butterfly whose wings clap of a storm<sup>24</sup> unheard, unseen, or flying fish dancing on a wave. (vii–viii)

The Dreamer calls this extended existential reality “Atahualpan form” (2). To perceive it by moving beyond the separated categories of being erected by “Cartesian form” (16) is to draw inspiration from living nature to envision a transfiguration of the antinomic relation between dominant and dominated cultures, though Harris does not optimistically suggest that it takes place. Pizarro and the Bishop who forces conversion on Atahualpa practice “the art of the sword . . . [t]he art of political diplomacy exercised by tyrants.” “Neither saw the mystery of wood and iron converted by a spark. Nor did they see the *life* of the land and water, the garden, the arteries of space and time. They saw nothing but reptilian gold, that fascinated them, the Beast and the Bird, which they loathed and melted, blindly, unseeingly” (11–12).

They are similarly indifferent to the lament of the landscape after Atahualpa’s execution, which the narrator perceives retrospectively: “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. The rivers and the waterfalls brazen it with sky-fall. I hear it all distinctly, however, silently, once again. I hear the voices of a great, ancient people come again from a body or rock and water and sky as they mourn the death of Atahualpa inflicted on him by the Conquistadores” (66–67).

After a dazzling vision of the “shadowy brilliance of elements within a black sky” (12–13), 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). In one of his talks, Harris asks:

What is art? 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 . . . in this long terrain of intuitive shapes . . . Man becomes 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. (“Power of the Word” 3)

In *The Dark Jester*, the Dreamer also repeatedly questions himself about the nature of art.<sup>25</sup> The answer is woven into the narrative. As we have seen, the origin of Harris’s own art lies in an upsurge of consciousness due to his sudden realization in the Guyanese heartland that the landscape was alive with the invisible presence of victimized peoples and their eclipsed history. In this novel, he reiterates the fictionalization of the source of art through the ruined configuration of the pre-Columbian Inca kingdom. The hidden inaccessible city of Vilcabamba<sup>26</sup> is clearly one embodiment of the never-discovered El Dorado (though, of course, the gold of Peru was an El Dorado for the Spanish conquerors). Already in his first essays, Harris had commented on the dual nature of El Dorado, both the object of “greed, cruelty and exploitation . . . [and] City of Gold, City of God” (*Tradition* 35). El Dorado, the gilded man, also disclosed “a living open tradition which realizes itself in an enduring capacity associated with the obscure human person” (*Tradition* 36). The obscure human person, whether in the Guyanese jungle or, more generally, in the underworld of the Americas, still provides an answer to the question, “What is art?” When the narrator discovers beneath the glitter of the man of gold his suffering flesh in the hold of a ship sailing in the Middle Passage: “Then it was that I saw the *first* work of art (was it the first, had I forgotten the others?) in the Underworld of the Kings of America. Half-flesh, half-work-of-art. A stretched figure, cruelly placed on a plank, in the belly of a slave-ship . . . Within a global trading system a glitter on flesh preserves the allure of material value, the high price to be earned in buying and selling works of art that can labour, cut cane, create dams and canals. Art and flesh like myself” (98–99; my emphasis).

Although Harris is often said to be an “abstract” writer, his fictional language is obviously inspired by concrete reality. For both protagonist and reader, art has always meant an awakening to the dense inner life of the

natural environment in close relationship with all living persons and creatures. His metaphysical perception of a world in the making has grown out of the landscape and the specific history of the Americas. Above all, what he calls a “cross-culturality between living nature and humanity” (*Mask of the Beggar* 50) generates his unique stylistic associations of all forms of life, as in the following passage that laments the death of Atahualpa:

I hear a Bird’s cry. It seems as distant as the Moon and yet closer than one can bear in its intensity and sorrow. . . . The Bird’s cry returns pregnant and full of Andean sloping, slender rhythms woven out of silences in the Clock of the Sun. Radiant sparks, icy darts, that sail in the Ship of my Mind. It is consciousness aroused through the volcanic upheaval of the land that speaks with a people’s sorrow across the ages. The call of aroused populations is nebulously lifted into a Bird’s cry on the high Andes. (67)

### Notes

1. *Palace of the Peacock* 26. For a complete, regularly updated bibliography on Wilson Harris, see <http://www.ulg.ac.be/facphl/uer/d-german/L3/whone.html>
2. In *Palace of the Peacock*, for instance, the narrator has the impression of being followed: “The forest rustled and rippled with a sigh and ubiquitous step. I stopped dead where I was, frightened for no reason whatever. The step near me stopped and stood still” (28). In *Heartland*, the protagonist feels he is being “watched.” The three parts of the novel are entitled “The Watchers,” “The Watched,” and “Creation of the Watch.”
3. Akin to John Keats’s notion of “negative capability.”
4. The strike lasted four and a half months in eight sugar estates on the east coast of Demerara in reaction to a change in the system of work from “cut-and-drop to cut-and-load.” On 16 June, the police opened fire at a plantation, killing five workers and injuring twelve. On this subject, see Cheddi Jagan, *The West on Trial* 90.
5. “I do not believe any area of the world is historyless or a product of absolute historical accident” (“Fabric of the Imagination” 176). See also *Tradition the Writer and Society*, where he explains that witnesses of the conquest of the Caribbean “seem to exist in a terrible void of unreality” (31).
6. In *Caliban’s Reason* 90–114.
7. The expression is borrowed from C. G. Jung’s *Synchronicity*.
8. The expression “womb of space” first appears in the novel *Genesis of the Clowns* 177.
9. See his many comments on this in *The Radical Imagination*.
10. On this subject, see Maes-Jelinek, “‘Carnival’ and Creativity in Wilson Harris’s Fiction.”
11. See “Theatre of the Arts.”

12. The name may have been inspired by Harris's great admiration for Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*, a painting in the National Gallery that represents the three ages of man with three animals under them, suggesting the link between the two species.

13. On the significance of this episode, see Harris's "Theatre of the Arts" 6.

14. The Jonestown "experiment" was a community and cooperative farm founded by a white American, Jim Jones, in the Guyanese heartland. Nearly a thousand people, including 276 children, who belonged to his sect of the "People's Temple" were forced to drink a sweetened cyanide soup or were shot on the spot. Jones's original purpose had been idealistic for his community of followers was multiracial and was meant to serve as a model of integration.

15. For a detailed analysis of their role, see Wilson Harris, "Apprenticeship to the Furies."

16. Cf. *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, in which the vengeful Homeric Ulysses is broken into several characters.

17. For a discussion of Harris's affinity with Maya culture in *Jonestown*, see Paula Burnett, "Memory Theatre and the Maya."

18. In *Palace of the Peacock*, Donne's will-to-power is at first associated with a pitiless sun (19). At the end of the novel, when he is at last humbled, the sun breaks into stars that become the peacock's eyes in "the palace of the universe" (146).

19. See the development of the whole passage (133-36).

20. In "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity," Harris explains that creativity and innovative form emerge from opposites or adversarial contexts. Both Deacon and Bone were born in 1930 and attended San Francisco College, where they met Jones, a fiction compatible with the real facts.

21. Harris has explained that eternity, which is usually conceived as an absolute, "is an implacable riddle . . . an extinction of birth and death in human creative terms" ("The Quest for Form" 22).

22. On this subject, see also Helen Tiffin, "The Metaphor of Anancy in Caribbean Literature."

23. However, in keeping with Harris's view that all kinds of fact, behavior, or motive potentially contain their reverse, the "tricksters of heaven" (dangerous messengers of eternity) later become "tricksters of spirit" (151). In *The Dark Jester*, the Jester or Trickster partakes of the sacred.

24. An allusion to the "butterfly effect," "the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York" (Gleick 8).

25. See also "What is Jest?" (ix), "What is history?" (1), "What is prophecy?" (24). The answers are all interlinked.

26. The city was the refuge of the last Incas. In 1911, the American historian Hiram Bingham went in search of this ghost city. What he eventually discovered in his obstinate exploration was the now-famous Machu Picchu (Bernand 113-22).