

Baudelaire's saying that 'the universe is a vast storehouse of images ... which must be digested and transformed' sounds like an apt summing up of Wilson Harris's fiction. Since *Palace of the Peacock*, the transformation of images and of the vision they convey has infused the regeneration of imagination and creativity which, throughout his writing, is presented as a *sine qua non* for the salvation of humanity. His latest novel is a transfigured 'divine comedy of existence', a modern Dantesque allegory which confronts indigenous and metropolitan worlds to explore the possibilities of change in a violence-ridden universe. It opens in 1982 with the assassination in London of Everyman Masters by a mysterious stranger. This is a re-enactment of his 'first death' in 1957 in similar circumstances in New Forest, South America. He was then a plantation overseer and was stabbed by the husband of an exploited woman who mistook him for someone else. After the shock of his 'first death' Masters walked the night of the metropolitan world of which he had been an agent 'in a corrupt colony' (87). It initiated the inquiry into 'hallucinated layers of being' which is largely the subject of the novel, though it is only his 'second death' which triggers off the 'biography of spirit' which he has asked his friend Jonathan Weyl, the I-narrator, to write.

From then on, Virgil-like, Masters becomes Weyl's major guide 'into the Inferno and the Purgatory of the twentieth century world' (15) but also 'into realms that seemed to exist before birth and after death' (30). This would seem to suggest that the novel develops on two levels, one of which implies the abolition of time, as the 'drama of consciousness' within Harris's protagonists usually does. There is indeed a breaking apart of the time of narration (1982) into slices of time remembered, but it is associated with the free movement through the 'light years' of past, present and future. Similarly, the narrative combines the duality illustrated in *Palace of the Peacock* (its outer and inner exploration) with the many-layered perception of the visionary artist to be found in *Ascent to Omai*: the 'sketches-within-sketches' that arise here from Mr Delph's 'far viewing' (163). This structural design corresponds to a metaphorical one since, as they progress from the beach of New Forest to its cave-like plantation tenements, the characters perform the fourth mythical epigraph to the novel. The various *loci* they re-visit in New Forest in their labyrinthine journey are both real and symbolical, both when they explore landscapes of creative dream and imagination when returning to 'Waterfall Oracle' in the interior, and when Jonathan and his wife Amaryllis descend into the ocean to understand the wasted lives of people who drowned, while Amaryllis was saved.

The first part of the narrative deals mostly with Masters' childhood, youth and adult life in New Forest, while the second tends to concentrate on Martin Weyl, the narrator's father and a lawyer who was also a friend of Masters'. Together they offer a powerful evocation of what it was like to live in the South American colony in the first half of the century: the Inferno condition of the poor, the narrow, obtuse existence of the middle class from which nevertheless such visionary characters as the Australian teacher Delph, Judge Quabbas, Martin Weyl and old aunt Alice emerge. The narrative progresses through significant incidents or facts which at first seem to have little connection until one realizes that each is a variable, a pregnant instance, of a particular strand of the human experience the novel recreates. For example, the apparently anodine wound Masters, aged nine, receives from a knife-like bone on the beach echoes and expands through the novel as we are faced with the many wounds by which the characters have been 'sliced': the sufferings of the poor, Martin Weyl crushed to death, the dagger in Masters' side or the wound 'in the armour of a civilization'. Yet this wound is seen throughout as a poten-

tially 'transfigurative' one. Masters' adolescent cousin Thomas, who was looking after him, is first beset by doubt as he tries to 'prove' Masters' wound, then by fear and uncertainty when he realizes that he has lost his charge and rushes back to New Forest where he collides with a black woman and knocks down her basket of eggs, a minor catastrophe in itself but a major one in her infernal plantation existence. This too is the germ of a series of collisions not the least of which is the historical one which took place on the same ground between Europeans and Amerindians.

The characters' allegorical dimensions clearly serve to question the ideals by which we live. So Thomas's 'poignant and heartrendering Doubt' acts as a counterpoint to Faith which 'blocks our vision of the starving and the emaciated in every corner of the world' (59). Even Memory, always an essential element in Harris's reconstructions, is seen as both true and false and embodied in the mysterious stranger from whom Masters runs away on the beach (his later assassin?). Here, however, allegory uncovers unforeseen psychological depths and parallels in flesh-and-blood characters, and also a mysterious force, of which the hidden voice or hidden conscience, heard but equally ignored by Johnny, the Carnival Czar, and Masters in his youth, seems to be only one manifestation among many. Though each is an individual in his own right, no character is self-contained. Thomas is 'the cousinly shadow [Masters] trailed behind him in history' (60). Johnny is a poor counterpart to rich Masters since, in both, Memory has aroused 'the seed of Ambition to rule; to master a universe that had despoiled one' (26). Like Masters, Johnny is stabbed to death, though not out of revenge, but by the tormented love of Thomas for the much older woman he is seeking to protect. At the trial Martin Weyl dons Thomas's mask and his role, pointing the way to the true revolution Thomas had failed to achieve, while later Masters survives a heart attack thanks to Martin Weyl's heart. All the personae the narrator encounters in his Dantesque journey are 'character-masks', actors in the carnival play of history, conscripted within a given frame of existence which Weyl penetrates in order to understand the real nature of their motives and to reverse through creative imagination the consequences of their actions. So penetrating Thomas's mask in conjunction with Quabbas' (the elderly man in love with his young niece) reveals that in both their apparently abnormal love hid a profound desire 'to give, to save, and receive nothing in return' (85). At the climax of this reconstruction Jonathan also realizes that violence, apparently irreversible in a desperate world, can yield 'a subversive edge, that turns into the terror of pity, the terror of beauty, the terror of gentleness, to ravage our minds and purge us *through* violence *of* violence' (90). This is illustrated metaphorically when they witness a storm at sea, just as his mother's suffering makes Jonathan aware that 'the roots of hope lie *through* hopelessness that is sliced, transfigured, sliced and sliced again and again' (96), or later that abnormality, confessed to, is redressed *through* abnormality, that oblivion *resists* oblivion. What is being asserted here is the reversibility of evil.

Harris's readers have long been familiar with his conviction that the very sources of human tragedy paradoxically offer their own healing power and that the very biases that imprison mankind can be broken down into their opposite. Hence the duality which informs all aspects of his fiction; its situations, characters, style, and particularly its imagery. Masters and Jonathan struggle through a labyrinth of innocence and guilt, and their journey involves both regression and progression. When Thomas sees her through the bars of the Alms House to which she has been relegated, Aunt Alice dances at once 'the realm of oblivion' and 'the realm of Carnival evolution into a family of spirit'; in her limbo condition she is 'the catalyst of fame at the heart of families of non-existence' (42). Fire is shown to consume but also to fertilize; the wheel that crushes Martin to death is

also the wheel of revolution. 'The fact that creation broke into halves, namely, absolute bliss/absolute terror, love/hate, beauty/dread (or whatever Carnival dualities one perceived) was a manifestation of unbroken but untouchable wonder, intact but unstructured mystery' (162). Thus Carnival, which may be a dead ritual for Czar Johnny, recovers its full power of liberation. Essentially, it is a capacity to move in and out of masks, in and out of frames of existence, whatever these may be, which must be exposed as the 'masquerade' we cling to. Carnival 'hides us from ourselves, yet reveals us to ourselves' (86).

Since his very first novel Harris has attempted to approach a deeper or 'intact' reality, a mysterious truth or wholeness which he knows to be unattainable by living man or unfathomable, and which in *Palace of the Peacock* was evoked in the timeless homecoming of the crew to the invisible folk. Again and again he has shown that in ordinary life all human perceptions, creations, and attitudes are necessarily partial (at once part of a whole and biased) and has therefore denounced the monistic character of most ideals in art or in life. In *Carnival* this results in two major developments. One is the writing process as it is actualized and elaborated by Jonathan since fiction writing itself is for him an object of exploration and reflection. It amounts to a genuine dialogue, a process of mutual creation or 'double writing' for the narrator is himself created by the characters who guide him, yet is also their 'father-spirit' (31). Thus only Masters' guidance makes it possible for Jonathan to become the 'fiction-parent of generations steeped in the collision of worlds' (34). In *The Tree of the Sun* the painter DaSilva is also 'created' by the figures he paints. The other development is Harris's bold transmutation of the Dantesque allegory. His earlier explorations of an underworld (which all his novels are) were already paralleled by glimpses of Paradise though he has repeatedly warned against the notion of an absolute Paradise. In *Carnival* we progress from Inferno to Purgatory to Paradise but *at the same time* we are repeatedly aware that descent runs parallel with ascent, and from the start Masters envisions 'the primal gateway into the underworld and overworld of the cosmos' (22). The last chapter illustrates this remarkably. Jonathan and Amaryllis have just become united and in their intercourse have reached 'the strangest climax, reality of paradise' (123). Chapter eight presents *together* or in parallel the ecstasies they experience (we are reminded throughout that Amaryllis is in Jonathan's arms) and the torments Masters goes through in the London Inferno where he has emigrated with poorer West Indians. This last part also makes it clear that the 'savage heart' of pagan cultures, pagan rituals (first revealed in the Amerindian prince who killed his mother to put an end to her sufferings) can be turned into a saving element as when Martin Weyl's 'savage heart' enables Masters to live his second life. Paradise and Inferno are indissociable throughout the novel; each exists in the other and those who descend into the Inferno pay for the glimpses of Paradise Jonathan and Amaryllis have access to. By fusing his own versions of West Indian Carnival and Dantesque allegory Harris actualizes in his own narrative the marriage of cultures they achieve.

These incomplete comments cannot account for the experience of reading a novel by Harris, for the dense ramifications of the narrative texture cannot be pulled apart. The frustrated critic can only agree with a recent statement by George Steiner:

Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text (the piece of music, the work of art) incarnates (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) a real presence of significant being. This real presence, as in an icon ... is, finally, irreducible to any other formal articulation, to any analytic deconstruction or paraphrase. (*T.L.S.*, 8. November 1985)

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