

ASCENT TO OMAI¹

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‘ Marque d’un signet rouge la
première page du livre, car la
blessure est invisible à son
commencement ’.

Edmond Jabès.²

Victor was three years old when his father, Adam, poked him in the side to keep him quiet while he, Adam, was making love with a prostitute on the floor of their slummy room. Withdrawing within a fortress of love, the child took refuge within the old petticoat of his dead mother hanging on the wall. But like a spear opening a wound in his side, the clout he received from his father was to be the hidden source of a drama of which he was at once the creator and the protagonist. A few years later Victor began to tease his father: he would wait for Adam, a welder by profession, as the latter came out of the foundry. Holding a mirror in his side, Victor would blind him with the light of the sun reflected in the mirror. Once Adam did not come out: he was starting a strike which ended six months later when he burnt down the factory and his own bed and board. The wound, the mirror and the fire stand out through Victor's life as catalysts of his ambivalent relationship with his father. Forty years after the latter's trial Victor goes in search of him on Omai, the hill of purgatory, on which as in our life on earth he progresses like a sleepwalker, determined nevertheless to explore the cyclic trail of memory.

From one novel to another Wilson Harris attempts to detect the beginning of the wound, the fissure which, like a crack in the earth or a chasm in the universe, may eventually produce a new world, a new man, a new consciousness. To grasp the nature of the dual role of man as inheritor and a maker of history is, to put it in Victor's words, 'a question of continuously revising one's conception of function, of re-considering, so to speak, the origin of function within a variety of signals and complexes'. It is a formidable task in which man can be tricked by mirages of the senses as by illusions of the mind, in which he can be hypnotized by nature and society and remain a mere puppet, unless he realizes that he is the instrument of a universal *unruined* consciousness which persists within him as within 'all ruined personality' and is capable of reviving. Once he understands that, as an agent, he is part of a transparent globe which can be filled with the density of his own consciousness, he can attempt to trace the beginning of his own function, his own history. In *Ascent to Omai* Wilson Harris suggests that in spite of his technological inventiveness modern man goes through a period of spiritual decline and is enslaved by the very civilization he has built. But memory subsists preserving among the ruins the charcoal residue of a heritage that awaits reinterpretation in order to help man to another leap forward.

The ruined personality in this novel is Adam. Incidentally, his name seems to be used in its original Hebraic meaning of man as a species. He is the victim reduced to a *tabula rasa*, a faceless man or, in Mayakovsky's words, a mere 'cloud in trousers'. Yet as Victor begins his ascent of Omai in pursuit of Adam, his *doppelgänger*, he is made aware of the possibilities of misinterpreting the past and his father's role, and realizes that in the rediscovery of human consciousness nothing can be left unquestioned. The very end of the quest is dubious: is OMAI the uncertain location of El Dorado, the ultimate purpose of all heartland quests in Harris's novels, or OH MY, the concrete pyramid of his solipsism? The answer seems to be both or rather a *rapprochement* between the two. For the creation of such a relation, dialogue, or 'treaty of

sensibility' between all opposites is, as we shall see, central to the novel.

The chasm in Victor's side, the blinding mirror which sprang from it and the fire lit by his father make up a chain reaction set off by the conflicting emotions of hatred and love by the despair of the dispossessed in a world of technological achievement and wealth. Yet the resentment that sought release in material destruction contained a seed of love and compassion. Even the raw energy of the sun accumulated by Victor at various removes was pregnant with 'areas of feeling' which, imperceptible as they were, would later flash back. Serial images are frequent in the novel: darkness-upon-darkness, milestone-within-milestone, a sketch-within-a-sketch, the judge-within-a-judge, etc. They remind one of those Dutch paintings in which a door opens on a series of rooms each revealing the next one through an increasingly smaller door. Sometimes in the foreground a woman looks at her double in the mirror, and the eyes of her own reflection reflect her in turn. In a like manner, Wilson Harris conveys the successive horizons of the worlds he explores as well as the serial selves which grow out of one another within the human personality.

As Victor explores the legacy of the past and crawls painfully through the undergrowth of his father's claim, he feels like one of those limbo dancers he used to watch as a child, who dance near the ground under a horizontal pole but rise again as through a door of rebirth. In Wilson Harris's view the limbo dancer enacts the drama of Caribbean man who was forced to the ground by conquest and slavery but is capable of rising from the abyss. More than that the dance interprets a universal plight. For Adam is universal man condemned to extinction unless the whole world extends itself into a 'courtroom of truth' prepared to revise its judgment and to re-appraise the significance of his sabotage of the human factory.

The trial dramatizes the 'gestation' of Victor's soul through his re-creation of the marking events in his and his father's life. It takes place in himself as if he were the human community made up of judge and accused, victor and victim, his witness.

It consists of two opposite movements. Just as a child he used to climb higher as the year advanced to reflect the sunlight on his father's brow, so now Victor climbs towards the sunset on OMAI. He thus approaches it from below, identifying himself with Adam, but also from above in the aeroplane or 'courtroom' he inhabits as a collective passenger. The aeroplane reflects the sun and flashes its light in his own eye below. So that forty years after the event the light shines *from* him and *upon* him, and the volcanic material of the past, which he stored in the mirror as a child, now throws light on him, or more exactly on the relationship into which he is entering with Adam. The aeroplane is the latest fortress man has built for himself, all 'technological roar without, caged psyche within'. Yet it is from this fortress that, at the sunset of his life, Victor attempts to throw a bridge between himself and the ruins of the past. The object of the trial is indeed a meeting between the living and the dead, between a man of the space age and the primitive past of which he has not yet freed himself. It amounts to balancing all opposites of which life is made: the *unfeeling* raw material with the *feeling* unity one confronts in the legacies of the past, the technological (scientific, mechanical) with the psychic (sensitive, mysterious) features discernible in all human achievement, what defence counsel calls 'primitive fetish' with 'Christian omen'.

The witnesses at the trial appear to be those solid and conventional possessions or spiritual fetishes with which we encumber the courtrooms of our lives. Yet as Victor gropes his way through past, present and future experience, seeking to define himself as well as Adam, he discovers in that rubbish 'an illumination of function that could divest itself of the overburden of appetite by subsistence of memory'. What is meant by this is explained by defence counsel when he tries to make clear to the court the significance of 'Fetish', a poem written by Adam. 'Fetish' is about disintegration but

viewed... as an omen of grace, it possesses, within every cloak of darkness, a frail light—a sacramental feeling for

reconciling the divided heritage of man)—which shines *through* every burden of acquisition as that burden inevitably disperses itself within an imperfect material constitution. It is this dispersal or disintegration *through* which the sacramental union or balance shines to transform the quality of our participation in the quantitative joys and woes of mankind.

In other words, this 'omen of grace' enduring beyond disintegration through man, nature, or society, reveals the existence of alternatives, of 'opposite existences' which man can only attempt to balance in order to compensate the blessings and curses of arbitrary fortune. The whole trial aims at convincing Victor that his world is doomed unless he rediscovers those alternatives in individual life and history and sifts 'the reality of *feeling* from [the] *unfeeling* cloak of emancipation and industry' characteristic of his age.

As the trial goes on, it is not so much Adam who is being judged as the court itself and the dead values it stands for. Adam, 'the sick man of the world' set fire to the factory in an apparently revolutionary act against 'ideological and technological fortresses'. Actually, he merely succumbed to another form of idolatry and tyranny. And yet forty years later Adam still appears as the 'light of omen', capable of evolving 'from nothing into a source of revelation', and is more eloquent than all the rational dogooders who claim to speak in his name. Adam fears and challenges the authority of the court, that other ideological fortress. In the end, however, all fortresses crumble; there is always a breach in the wall, a chasm in the earth, and time is an invisible but omnipresent witness at the trial. Not time as another prison house or a material commodity, but time as a qualitative, illuminating gauge revealing to the judge (Victor) the resilience of Adam's ghost and his capacity for rebirth.

Time in this sense seems to be equated with consciousness. Or, to put it in another way, it only comes to life, is retrieved from the void, in moments of creation. 'Dead time', says defence counsel, 'is stored energy which may have a catastrophic explosive

significance ... living time is that power or medium of presence one can summon at any stage to commune with and compensate the past.' When the judge (Victor) comes in view of Manoa, the evocation of the tragic events of his life coincides with a revival of time. As a child, Victor used to throw pebbles into the canal and watch the ripples expand. As each horizon died in the water giving way to another, he would also experience a sense of death and rebirth. Now like a stone falling into the pool of his consciousness, the tragedy of his childhood generates 'concentric rings representing frontiers of memory'; it becomes 'an inner lighthouse whose store of energy re-activated horizons of conquest'. The pressure of that volcanic stone explodes one by one the fortresses of Victor's youth. From one horizon to another, one wounding experience to another, the Judge (Victor) goes through the death of each successive self, whether real or imagined, since Victor disappeared immediately after the trial of his father, and it is not known with certainty what vocation or alternative he invested in as a substitute for a genuine emancipation. So the judge witnesses each epitaph give birth to another of his existences by freeing him from his 'selfsufficient illusion[s] of character.'

Possibly, the various stages of his liberation also represent successive stages in the evolution of man. But whether personal or historical, it is clearly by rekindling the 'charcoal of memory', and conquering the former deserts of his life that the judge (Victor) becomes aware of the 'vicar of lighthouse', the mysterious, regenerating power in each of them. Towards the end of the trial, as the stone keeps sinking and exploding the limits of ages, the 'vicar of lighthouse' takes on different shapes within the judge's (Victor's) consciousness, but is always a revelation of a possible balance between opposites, what Wilson Harris calls 'The mystery of life-in-death; death-in-life'. The dead can fertilize the living; the enslaved and the dispossessed, because of their very dispossession, can penetrate the most secret prisons of mankind, can help man strive for freedom through knowing unfreedom'. To acknowledge the existence of alternatives inherent in ruin or vacancy as well as the possibility of their mutual fertilization is the

only way of availing oneself of the breach in the wall. All this is brought home to the judge (Victor) as he immerses himself in the depths of the 'uncharted seas' in his imaginative quest of the sailor and limbo dancer of Albuoytown. Each horizon wreathed from the descending stone grows into the movement of a dance which, like limbo, leaves a passage for rebirth. For the first time descent and ascent coincide in the vision of the judge approaching OMAI. When Victor eventually confronts his father after the crash and the explosion of his fortress he realizes that the latter had all the time been fighting the very fire he had started. For the last time Victor sees the remnants of the ancient petticoat. When it finally crumbles, 'expunged ... of fear, of loss, of degradation, of extinction of species ... in conformity with the ruin of catastrophe—it retained a living spark, a frail star'.

Like Harris's other novels, *Ascent to Omai* is the painful framing of a consciousness on the blank canvas of existence. The true moment of consciousness is that in which opposites are joined in harmonious balance. Towards the creation of such a moment Wilson Harris's characters seek the redeeming thread of compensating love through the dark corridors of memory. This striving after contrasting perspectives conditions the very structure of the novel: the ascending centripetal movement of Victor's search for his father is balanced by the centrifugal horizons generated by the descending volcanic stone until these horizons of consciousness become integrated into a single vision. Language is the unifying factor: not the conventional mode of expression of the familiar and the customary, but words that emerge from the primordial silence and shape the judge's consciousness. As in most of his novels, Harris lets the past carry its own light and the world's complexity speak for itself to the reader's mind and senses, refusing 'to impose a false coherency upon material one had to digest—perhaps all one's life'. The reader is invited to participate in this difficult process, to share in the genesis of consciousness through language. Victor, the judge, is also a writer whose re-creation of Adam's trial is a 'novel-history', an attempt 'to find ... a true groping equation in art or language to the fundamentals of existence through

history or the void which was native to history'. He is a 'creative struggler' involved in the task of 'being born through words'. 'Tu es celui qui écrit et qui est écrit', says the poet³: this is the essence of *Ascent to Omai*.

FOOTNOTES

1. Wilson Harris, *Ascent to Omai* (London, 1970).
2. 'Mark in red the first page of the book, for the wound at its beginning is invisible'. Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Questions* (Paris, 1963).
3. 'You are the one who writes and who is written'. Edmond Jabès, *op. cit.*