

Charting the Uncapturable in Wilson Harris's Writing¹

Hena Maes-Jelinek

He saw the complexities yet simplicities of a fiction one may involuntarily write which involves a broken family with an entire humanity though its seed lies in obscure provinces, obscure sorrow hills.

—Wilson Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*

May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it?

—J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*

In his recent writing, both self-reflexive analytical fiction and imaginative criticism, Wilson Harris has returned emphatically to the Amerindian presence in Central America, as part of “the womb of space,” at once actual territory pregnant with physical and psychical resources, “largely submerged territory of the imagination,” and primordial seat of life and of a creativity that can never be fully apprehended nor given final expression: “No art of total capture or subordination of originality within formula exists despite appearances,”² originality evoking here both origins and significant innovation. Harris pretends neither to a complete recovery of Caribbean origins nor to absolute originality but rather concentrates on the way creativeness can operate, particularly in a postcolonial context. In this respect his exploratory narratives form a unique matrix of new cartography, both geographical and metaphorical, which reconceptualizes the Caribbean and its creative potentiality.

Though a highly sophisticated technology now makes possible perfectly accurate topographical surveys, cartography is still influenced by self-centered and hegemonic nationalism, and in spite of pretensions to the contrary, such persisting subjectivity and domineering self-assertion find their equivalent in all disciplines of the humanities directly influenced or not by geopolitical perceptions of the world. The process by which Europeans appropriated not only the geographical but also the mental and psychological territory of the conquered peoples has by now been elucidated.³ But whether the victims of conquest recovered their original imaginative space together with political independence, whether they even *can* or should do so, remains a much debated question, particularly in postcolonial post-structuralist criticism, though, inevitably, the debate is conducted in, and therefore limited to, the intellectual epistemological terminology of the colonizing West. Moreover, although much postcolonial criticism chal-

lenges the claim to accuracy of the mimetic representation of actual territories with its political and cultural consequences, comparatively little attention is given to the similar conception of mapping of the human experience and psyche in literary texts. For example, Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* argues that the rise of the English novel is inextricably linked with the growth of imperialism which underpins and supports the image of society presented in English fiction. Yet while questioning the “consolidated vision” of the “central authorizing subject,” he doesn’t say a word on the subject’s chosen mode of representation, which certainly contributed to the consolidation of the imperialistic vision, but merely states that “the ‘what’ and ‘how’ in the representation of ‘things’ . . . are circumscribed and socially regulated,” while “allowing for considerable individual freedom.”⁴

Wilson Harris, who emphasized the link between imperialism and the rise of the novel nearly thirty years ago, claimed, on the contrary, that “this freedom . . . however liberal [it] may appear—is an illusion,”⁵ and he has since repeatedly shown that realism both as a way of perceiving and acting upon the world and as a mode of writing is arbitrary in its failure to acknowledge whole areas of experience, while the concomitant growing influence of rationalism reduced the earth itself to a “passive creature” cut off from its roots. The difference with Said’s analysis is that, for Harris, undermining a consolidated vision is not exclusively or mainly a matter of political change, though ultimately it includes that too, but first requires a renewed grasp of the human psyche and of a profound reality at once phenomenal and cultural.

In a well-documented article entitled “T. W. Harris—Sworn Surveyor,” Tim Cribb demonstrates in the light of geographical surveys he consulted in Georgetown that Harris’s response to the Guyanese landscape together with the epistemological mutation it entailed in his worldview and writing has a solid base in his experience as a professional surveyor.⁶ His analysis of Harris’s surveys throws light on what was indeed a neglected source of exegesis of his conception of art, though I would say that Cribb’s emphasis on its pragmatic origins complements rather than corrects other interpretations that privilege a conceptual genesis of Harris’s fiction. His own article testifies to the correlation between the two approaches. I would even take one step farther his assertion of the scientific verifiability and correspondence of Harris’s vision and suggest that both the practice and the concept of “infinite rehearsal” Harris has evolved through his twenty-one novels run parallel with a similar process in science. For in its attempt to understand the universe, science continually challenges its own discoveries and is involved in an “infinite rehearsal” of its own, an endless revisioning and revising of earlier, sometimes partial misconceptions, or, in Harris’s words, “consuming [its] own biases,” also called “sin eating” in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*.⁷ And if man has made tremendous progress in knowledge and understanding, he doesn’t seem any closer to answering ultimate questions about the mystery of creation, the origins of life, and what is, apparently at least,

the finality of death, whether of individuals or whole societies. *Resurrection* does not claim to give conclusive answers to these questions; that would run counter to Harris's rejection of finality whether in ontological or epistemological concepts. But the territory it charts opens onto dimensions suggesting an increasingly deep perception of sources of renewal both of man's endless capacity for development and of art, particularly in the Caribbean.

Harris's spatial narratives were always conceived in terms of mapping, itself a preliminary to a renewed apprehension, and therefore rebirth, of neglected areas, people(s), and their psychological motivations. The dreaming narrator's vision in *Palace of the Peacock* already fashioned the geopsychic setting, the equation between self and space, to be found in all Harris's fictions. The majority of the crew were then also from Sorrow Hill, an actual small settlement in Guyana, a country mostly ignored in our highly mediatized, globalized world. Putting it on the map, however, involves far more than filling the blanks of colonial cartography or exposing its distortions. Sorrow Hill in the later novel is both "native and universal . . . born of a precipitation from voyages and movements of peoples descending from ancient America, from Renaissance Europe, from the Siberian straits, from Africa, from India, from Asia . . . equally it sprang from the soil of written and unwritten histories at a confluence of three rivers and three civilizations, pre-Columbian civilization, post-Columbian civilization, and a civilization that dwells in spaces still unplumbed . . ." (4). By locating his narrative in an obscure heartland territory, Harris reiterates his belief that a solution to the present crisis of civilization could emerge from the margins. "The future of Guyana lies here" (24), says Hope, the gauge-reader protagonist who writes the novel as "a book of space" (17). When he and his mistress Butterfly, the beautiful and vulnerable queen of ruined El Dorado, are killed by her husband, the ambivalent Christopher D'eath, Hope nevertheless survives to re-create the history of the inmates of the Sorrow Hill Asylum for the Greats, a former prison under colonial rule. Like other Harris characters who partake of several dimensions of being, the inmates are both dead and alive, ordinary men yet dual personalities, who in their schizophrenic dividedness impersonate famous historical figures like Montezuma, Leonardo, or Socrates. They harbor the tension between destruction and survival, annihilation and the pull toward resurrection, between despair and faith, the crucial choice men face in the "Age of Sorrows," miniaturized in their asylum. Hope, too, the "visionary madman" (240), suffers from an acute breakdown and is split between fear of extinction and a saving love, while Dr Daemon, ambivalent genius and doctor of souls, goes through bouts of despair after his bride's death.

Resurrection at Sorrow Hill is an all-embracing epic in Harris's revised sense of the word, in a setting that bears marks of modern invasions, but, as suggested, it is pregnant with the neglected resources of a still primordial world. As a "confluence of spaces" (6), Sorrow Hill is at once a theater of

collapsed cultures and a “theatre of psyche,” whose complexities Hope charts on a scale that registers the eruption from the unconscious of extra-human faculties personified in animal creatures but also gods or semigods, like Quetzalcoatl or the androgynous Tiresian seer, now maimed judge, now Daemon’s grandmother, who recalls the old Arawak woman of ancestral wisdom who keeps surfacing in Harris’s fiction. Ancient myth co-exists with the invasion of science and technology. Hope’s gauging is computerized, while Dr Daemon’s sophisticated telescope enables him to scan the primitive landscape under his eyes, mythical and actual constellations, and the wider cosmos with its intimations of other parallel worlds. The fall of Montezuma’s empire and his personal tragedy are echoed by the fall of the Ptolemaic universe and Giordano Bruno’s burning at the stake, though it is Montezuma who bears the burden of these falls. And the historical disasters of the Renaissance reverberate in present-day conflicts. But above all, the intense individual emotions that fire such conflicts prove major sources of violence, and the inmates’ split personality and impersonations of famous past figures are symptoms of frustration generated by these undigested overwhelming emotions. Monty, for example, imprisoned for a crime he has not committed, is obsessed with the same desire for revenge as Montezuma, the fallen emperor. The mute cry of a child for whose murder Brazilian feels responsible pursues him in Sorrow Hill. Len takes himself for Leonardo da Vinci and sees the murdered child on da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks*. A striking metaphorical web unfolds from the painting, first misused by a fascist league in Brazil as emblem of the ethnically pure virgin state they want to establish, then revealing the possible transubstantiation of the murdered child into the eucharist.

This is just one example of the inmates’ capacity to transfigure their catastrophic experiences into a creative potential, a major theme in Harris’s art, which repeatedly points to the creativeness and possibility of renewal inherent in the disruptive wounds of history. In their present condition the inmates share the silence and voicelessness into which the ghosts of the past they impersonate have fallen as well as the eclipsed state of the Amerindians who haunt the narrative and take part with them in the carnival procession of funeral masks awaiting resurrection (228). Their role offers another instance of the correlation between historic trauma and possible rebirth, between what Hope calls “the substance of the voice of the dumb” (75) and “a multi-dimensional creator or god” (29). One is reminded of *The Secret Ladder* when Poseidon, the god-like leader of the runaway slaves, soundlessly addresses the surveyor Fenwick in “the silent accents of an ageless dumb spirit.”⁸ In the new novel this has developed into a “ventriloquism of spirit” (78), which animates the “originality in the ramifications of apparently passive psyche in nature to break the hubris of one-sided human discourse” (78-79). This “ventriloquism of spirit,” also “speech prior to speech” (75), informs various expressions of creativity (language, music, sculpture, creative fire) that Hope can only partially apprehend.

Indeed, if resurrection is creation and vice versa, "there is no second coming which is absolute and singular" (193). Rather Hope's nonlinear charting narrative progresses through myriad images of breaking and partial re-memberments, through an alternation of sensuously evoked landscapes, sexual desire and ecstasy, and a perception of the more abstract "compositional reality" (112) of existence, a mosaic of its oppositional elements across ages and cultures. Analytical dialogues are succeeded by the resurgence of Amerindian gods in nature out of their postconquest silence. The *Timehri* hand of god, for instance, is everywhere perceptible on the canvas of nature, and the mask of the Aztec monkey-god advises Montezuma to acknowledge he was partly responsible for his fall. The major metaphor running through the novel is the ceaselessly arriving, splintering ship of space (31, 36) re-enacting different catastrophes *in conjunction*, however, with the reconstitution of "the composition of the vessel" (68). The multiple variations on the structural metaphors of breaking and reconstitution are so many manifestations of the resurrection as process of transformation or conversion, translation from one mode of being into another,⁹ on which Harris has commented: "Christian ideology invests . . . in the resurrection as the conquest of Death. And I would suggest that to do so is to forfeit a revisionary momentum within resources of language. The resurrection may imply *not conquest at all* but a transition from one dimension or universe of sensibility to another."¹⁰ In keeping with the complete absence of monistic absolutes in Harris's narratives, the resurrectionary process combines with alternations both in Hope's perceptions and the configuration of the territories he charts. Subject to spells of insight and deception, Hope advances through unplumbed and resurrected spaces, through opacities or densities which alternate or run parallel with transparencies (174), sometimes gripped by "congealed yet eruptive energies of flight" (64) until, unpredictably, in a split second of illumination, he hits on the possibility of creation:

He was involved from the beginning of time and space in the composition of the vessel . . . Above all . . . he was involved in the possibility of originating dimension that gave a new intensity to every splinter . . . in the bristling orchestra of BIG BANG. Big Bang drum of the rapids.

Was such inchoate origin or unfinished capacity an inimitable progression in its own right in parallel with the crumbling progression of the end-game world, the end-game vessel of the globe within the rapids? (68)

As "space attendant" (26) and "resurrection guide" (28), Hope is in search of "a truth that lies behind the ruins of adventure, colonization, that infest the face of the globe" (55), but he discovers that he can gain only intermittent access to windows into a reality out of reach in its totality yet partly perceptible through a growing "phenomenal literacy" (10, 12, 18, 28), another meaningful Harris coinage, conveying a capacity to read terrifying yet exalting depths and heights of landscape and history and translate

them into art. And just as his mapping thrusts him nearer the unseizable "composition of wholeness" (110), so his fictional charting allows him to apprehend a voiceless spirit that had surrendered its voicelessness "to sounding rocks and waters and fires and soil" (35).

The victimized dumb intermittently reappear in Harris's fiction in a character called Nameless. Significantly an Archangel in this novel, he throws further light both on Hope's writing process and on the nature of the resurrection. He questions Hope's claims to single authorship and says that he writes himself into the pages of Hope's book (171). Indeed, the narrative, initiated by Daemon's grandmother, not only unfolds through Hope's dialogues with the "mad" but is also frequently taken over by those who guide, inspire or point to the self-deceptions of his charting. He is in no way a self-sufficient author; rather, the narrative shapes itself through him, though as Harris was careful to point out some years ago, this kind of effacement does not mean "the death of the author" in Barthes's sense or postmodernist practice, which, in his view, can lead to language games in the absence of referential meaning. The relativization of authorship in his fiction is inherent in creativity as process of reciprocity: "linkages between characters and authors, linkages between a painted world that paints the painter even as the painter paints . . . a written world that writes the writer as the writer writes . . ." (147); "In such mutuality of living text, living fiction, it was possible to bear the shock of becoming a tool of an elemental God . . ." (155).

The resurrection too evolves from such reciprocity between, on the one hand, altering, extended, or keener perceptions and, on the other, active presences and phenomena erupting from Hope's unconscious. So, like fiction writing, the resurrection is endless process or, to use another Harris expression, "unfinished genesis." It is above all latent survival and possible resurgence of an essential component in the make-up of men and cultures. When Nameless explains to Hope the way he may envisage it, he concludes "We are relics of fire" (242); in that fire and the rhythmical harmony perceived on and off in the narrative lies the secret of the resurrection, a multifaceted phenomenon, revival of unmapped dimensions, of the spirit in man and nature, of consciousness and conscience, of love and of meaning. It issues from a fracture in what Nameless sees as "the paralysis of materialism" (241). Daemon had earlier encouraged Hope to a "spiritual subversion . . . instinct with creative insight" (84). This can be read as a concise summing up of a religious strand in Harris's writing, which also involves breaking prior to transfiguration. We saw that the mad, broken by life, were associated with the dumb victims of conquest, themselves ghosts partaking of an elusive creator. The mad ones too, one character says, "know that a vulnerable humanity may strike a concert with Shadows of divine element that are alive" (156). Though never idealized, madness can nevertheless be "involuntary genius" (53), a spur to its own transfiguration into "creative schizophrenia," as Michael Gilkes called what he also sees as a major source of creativeness in the Caribbean. In Harris's fiction the Caribbean

predicament extends its creative potential to the resolution of similar worldwide crises: "Hope's peculiar neurosis drives him to create fictions in which transfigured oppositions are necessary if the incorporation of one culture by another is to become an evolving source of re-visionary healing within diverse bodies and cultures that do relate to each other yet are at war with each other everywhere . . ." (162-63). At the end of the novel Hope hears a kind of music synonymous with creation and finds in all ruptures the origin of an art opening onto what can only be a ceaseless renewed charting:

A trinity of pens [Hope's, Daemon's, Archangel's] lay now within the breach of catastrophe, eloquent, cool flame, charcoal burn and splinter, and archangelic hand of the Clock.

Hope seized them all with ecstatic gratitude as if he stood upon the very threshold of his book and a chorus of griefs arose within which an unseen orchestra moved and reassembled singing, dancing pillars where flame had stood around the ageless Mask of the seer. (244)

"And the response in the book?" the reader could then ask with one of the characters. "There is no dogmatic response [says Dr Daemon]. . . . The ship of the church, the ship of the state, the ship of a civilization, are weathered, weathering masks of a broken family (and its outcasts, as well as its survivors) through which the resurrection breaks open all incorporations . . . and thereby gives profoundest numinosity to an Imagination that recovers, in a variety of guises, those we appear to have lost" (166).

NOTES

¹This is a shortened version of a paper read at a conference on "New Cartographies" which took place at the University of Oxford on 5 and 6 March 1995.

²Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport: Greenwood, 1983), xix, xvii.

³See, among others, Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797* (1986; rpt. London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴*Culture and Imperialism* (1993; rpt. London: Vintage, 1994), 84, 95.

⁵*Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967), 29. In this essay Harris had also anticipated the connection between empire and the rise of the novel suggested later by Said: "the rise of the novel in its conventional and historical mould coincides in Europe with states of society which were involved in consolidating their class and other vested interests" (29).

⁶"T.W. Harris—Sworn Surveyor," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28.1 (1993): 33-46.

⁷*Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁸Wilson Harris, *The Whole Armour and The Secret Ladder* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 156.

⁹On this subject, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Faces on the Canvas: The Resurrection Theme in *The Tree of the Sun*," *WLWE* 22.1 (1983): 88-89; and "Altering Boundaries: The Art of Translation in *The Angel at the Gate* and *The Twyborn Affair*," *WLWE* 23.1 (1984): 165-74.

¹⁰Charles Rowell, "An Interview with Wilson Harris," *Callaloo* 18.1 (1995): 194.
