

# “Tricksters of Heaven”: Visions of Holocaust in Fred D’Aguiar’s *Bill of Rights* and Wilson Harris’s *Jonestown*

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*For Jeanne, life-long friend and fellow-traveller*

*Through joys and sorrows and the pursuit of common interests, we shared the privilege of friendship for nearly half a century, no doubt one of the most hopeful and disappointing in the history of mankind. To evoke its apocalyptic visions may seem a strange subject to celebrate your achievement as a teacher and a critic. But, as Wilson Harris’s art invites us to believe, “it is possible to nourish hope that the dislocation of cultures need not continue to breed repetitive cycles of eternal violence, eternal revenge” and to have faith in an “annunciation of humanity.”<sup>1</sup>*

In November 1978 took place in Guyana what must have been the first and most horrible mass suicide/murder of cult members in contemporary society. Nearly one thousand people died, of whom two hundred and seventy-six children, who were forced to drink a sweetened cyanide soup or were shot on the spot. The alleged purpose of the Reverend Jim Jones, an American like his victims, in founding the “People’s Temple” sect and a settlement in Guyana was to create a model community and cooperative farm, a centre of light which, as in Conrad’s prophetic *Heart of Darkness*, only brought death and destruction. There was even a macabre repetition of Marlow’s expedition to the Central Station when, a few days before the massacre, an American Congressman, Leo Ryan, who came to investigate what was going on in Jonestown, was shot dead and some of his companions wounded by Jones’s acolytes as they were getting off the plane on the nearby airstrip.

In *Black and White* the late Shiva Naipaul wrote an account of the tragedy, in which he emphasized the support Jones received from American and Guyanese institutions and from eminent personalities in both California and Guyana, and brings to light the general lack of moral discrimination and insight into such ventures, the mistaken tolerance which, as Paula Burnett points out in her excellent review of Wilson Harris’s *Jonestown*, makes us all accomplices

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Harris, “The Quest for Form,” 22–3.

in the event.<sup>2</sup> Naipaul's inquiries into the "drama of ideas" which preceded Jones's emigration to Guyana with his followers in 1977 and into various groups of Californian society provide yet another version of the American dream gone wrong and make clear two disturbing aspects of a now more familiar phenomenon: a total rejection of personal responsibility by anyone involved and the moral confusion of a society seeking refuge in a variety of phoney spiritual or communal ventures. But his argument that the establishment of Jonestown in Guyana squared with the prevailing corruption in the country appears, to say the least, questionable:

I was not particularly surprised when, one morning, I heard on a BBC Radio news programme that an American Congressman, who had gone to Guyana to investigate an agricultural commune inhabited by hundreds of fellow Americans and run by a socialist preacher from California, had been shot and killed in an ambush at a remote jungle airstrip. Such an event, I felt, was entirely in keeping with the atmosphere of the Cooperative Socialist Republic (9).

How would Naipaul have interpreted similar events that have since taken place in the United States themselves,<sup>3</sup> Switzerland, Canada, France and Japan where the destruction intended for the non-initiates of the Aum sect was to reach inconceivable proportions? The group killings and suicides in France took place as recently as Christmas 1995 when seventeen survivors of the "Temple Solaire" sect, of whom fifty three members had died the year before in Switzerland, were killed and burned on an altar in Vercors. In between the two events, neither the Swiss nor the French police, informed of the sect's activities, tried to prevent a repetition of the killings, nor was anyone sued. Are they to be accused, like the Guyanese authorities, of showing

a predilection for welcoming, assisting and sheltering strange people, a weakness springing from a peculiar sort of gangsterism that can contain within itself both corrupt cynicism of the highest order and ideological motivation? (36)

Or is the rational, incredulous, naive incapacity to understand the charismatic and manipulative power of sect leaders a more complex issue than Naipaul realized?

Two writers of Guyanese origin<sup>4</sup> have explored what one of Naipaul's informants called "the mystery of that place and those people" (69). Both offer an inside, fictional interpretation of the Jonestown tragedy, which nevertheless throws light on a major twentieth-century phenomenon. I intend to concentrate on Wilson Harris's novel *Jonestown*. However, Fred D'Aguiar's remarkable poetic sequence *Bill of Rights*, though more recently published, imagines the experience of a member of the People's Temple and significantly complements Harris's (and his protagonist's) largely metaphysical dialogue with the dead. D'Aguiar's poem is in some way such a dialogue too since the

<sup>2</sup> Paula Burnett, "Apocalypse Now and Then," *New Statesman*, 12 July 1996, 48.

<sup>3</sup> In *50 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*, the authors Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen argue that Jones was linked to the CIA and make the horrible suggestion that Jonestown was a CIA experiment in a "mind-control program" that ran amok.

<sup>4</sup> Both Fred D'Aguiar and Wilson Harris think Jonestown was the most horrible catastrophe that could have happened in Guyana. Another British Guyanese writer, David Dabydeen, is preparing a dramatization on the subject and a documentary for the BBC Radio 3 and 4.

narrative voice is mainly that of an anonymous speaker whose letters sent from Jonestown to a Rasta friend in Brixton remain unanswered and he learns only after his return that his friend has died of cancer. The thirty-three-year-old protagonist seems to have been one of the underprivileged to whom Jones claimed to be offering a purposeful life and redemption. An ordinary man, "A mercen-/ary maybe, archvillain/certainly not" (2), observant and given to introspection, he left his Brixton council flat to join the cult leader in the States and end up in Guyana, a triangular journey evoking not actual slavery in spite of its colonial resonance and ghetto experiences in Brixton, Chattanooga and Kalamazoo, but a persistent mind enslavement, the "mind-forged manacles" that Blake already perceived in a crowded, morally blind metropolis.

With comparable poetic concision, the narrator conveys the swift transition from the neophytes' enthusiasm and unconditional dedication to Jones (God, the Father, as he actually called himself) to despair as their utopian project fastly crumbled in their inexperienced struggle with a pitiless nature and they barely survived thanks to the generosity and practical advice of the local Amerindians and the help of the Guyanese government. Very soon also Jones's perversity and tyrannical methods came to the fore, reinforcing the protagonist's sense of being trapped and cut off from the rest of the world as in any dictatorship. Though the memory of it later interrupts his evocation of life on the farm, the massacre itself and its immediate aftermath are briefly but poignantly recorded early in the narrative:

Men, women and children queue before a pot  
More like a vat and drink or else are shot,

Their cries that could raise the dead, raise hair  
And a thousand flutes in a death air,

A thousand flutes piled on top  
Each other, like so many grains of rice.

...  
A thousand flutes for bullets  
A thousand souls for flutes  
A thousand bullets for souls

...  
Silence except for the baying of the blood  
Silence above the wind in the trees  
Silence as the river breaches its banks  
Silence of us like fish in a tank  
Silence in the lengthening plait of vines  
Silence . . . (15-6).

The bone-flute, also a recurring metaphor in Wilson Harris's writing, was an instrument made by the Caribs out of the hollowed bones of their dead enemies, particularly evocative of their encounter with the Spanish invaders before they were completely exterminated by them. In Harris's fiction it is a vessel of "mutual spaces" between enemies and a "bridge upon which the ghost of music runs. . . between the living and the dead."<sup>5</sup> D'Aguiar's metaphorization of Jones's victims into flutes also connects the Jonestown killings

<sup>5</sup> "On the Beach," 339. As we shall see, Francisco Bone, the assumed name of Harris's protagonist in *Jonestown*, suggests that he is a medium between the extinct and the survivors of holocausts.

with the Renaissance conquest and its victims. The anaphora in the last stanza quoted above, a characteristic feature of Caribbean poetry, particularly in the oral tradition, punctuates the rhythm of the sequence and on a larger scale its structure. The alternation of conversational and higher diction, the many-levelled tones, voices, linguistic registers and rhythmic patterns, another idiosyncrasy of Caribbean verse, are impressively varied. So is the intertextual fabric of the narrative which orchestrates brief citations from Shakespeare, de la Mare, Auden, Keats (ironically suggesting the gap between the romantic idealization and the reality of the South American heartland) with West Indian folk- and slave-songs, calypso, Reggae poetry and brief echoes of Brathwaite, Walcott, Matthews, Marley or Linton Kwesi Johnson.

Poetry then is here the polyphonic instrument through which D'Aguiar's own "Bill of Rights" takes shape while mapping the extraordinary cultural diversity and resources of the English language in Britain and, in the process, asserting the people's human rights. A "Bill of Rights" was also the ideal the protagonist shared with his Brixton friend (73–6) and which drove him to Jonestown. Having survived the tragedy, he retires to Augusta in Maine, numb and apparently still morally confused, oscillating between remorse and the rejection of responsibility (... Nor have I hollowed an enemy's bone/into a flute [126]). He lives utterly cut off from all human contact, except for the regular visits of a whore. Nevertheless, neither he nor the reader can help being haunted by the ghosts of Jonestown:

When I walk, it's over a thousand  
Dead; so I stand on the spot  
Staring at one place  
Whose pattern, I pray, will not  
Scramble into a town full of dead (124).

Published several months before *Bill of Rights, Jonestown* opens where the poem ends and concentrates on the spiritual numbness of those involved in the venture and of a humanity contaminated by the sickness of a dying age. It indirectly forestalls the anticlimactic last line of D'Aguiar's sequence, "the authorities are none the wiser" (129) by asserting the need "to go beyond politics and history" (*Jonestown* 160) in order to explain such horrors and grasp one's full responsibility for one's own fate and that of others. Naipaul made the Californian and Guyanese authorities largely responsible. For D'Aguiar's protagonist Jones is the culprit. He is deeply affected by the tragedy yet stops short of a deeper (self-)judgement though this is implicit in the poetic voice and its metaphorical association of Jonestown with earlier historical events of a similar nature. In Harris's novel what happened in Guyana on the "Day of the Dead" is not seen as an isolated event either but as part of a large-scale historical and moral context, one among similarly inspired disasters in different social and natural environments. It explores all the interstices of "the holocaust that afflicts us all in a variety of overt and masked forms everywhere" (126) and, as a manifestation of an irrational and incomprehensible will to destroy, it epitomizes other twentieth-century "ideological" genocides. If the Jonestown tragedy cannot be compared literally to the massacres and holocausts that have taken place in the world since the conquest of the Americas, the motivations of its more obscure actors, as scrutinized by

Harris, throw considerable light on similarly motivated if far more extensive events.

Francisco Bone, the first-person narrator, also narrowly escaped death in Jonestown and wandered for seven years after the tragedy, suffering from partial amnesia before he dared attempt to elucidate the meaning of survival and "the enigma... of shared Passion between spoilers and despoiled" (19). The opening letter he writes to W.H. on a "Dateless Day" (outside a conventional time-scale), asking him to edit the "Dream-book" of which he (Bone) is the real author, is a major feature which, as we shall see, takes various forms in the narrative, i.e. the emergence into the consciousness of both writer and narrator of presences buried in an apparent void, the "extinct" of the Jonestown experiment. They remind Bone of the large-scale enigmatic disappearance or breakdown of peoples in Central and South America. But, as Mr Mageye, his former teacher, now his guide in his imaginary *Odyssey*, tells him, it is his personal gradual awakening from numbness and amnesia, both typical of twentieth-century man, the resurgence of "passion and emotion" (56) in himself and in apparently dead history (50) which, "brought [him] face to face with the accumulated spectres of years, the dread spectre of the twentieth century" (56). Bone's consciousness then becomes a "Memory Theatre," a receptacle of ghostly vanished multitudes as of individual concrete actors in the tragedy, and he sees himself as a "diminutive entity of community and self" (5).

Most of Harris's novels are re-visionary epics or allegories divested of repetitive patterns inspired by great or sublime original models but whose outdated perspectives or world view often remain unquestioned. His "re-visions" of canonical epics and allegories such as *The Odyssey* and *The Divine Comedy* elicit transformative and regenerating potentialities of interpretation of human experience that frees their heroes and monsters from the stereotypical behaviour<sup>6</sup> in which they have been enshrined. Convinced of the necessarily partial nature of all thought and human experience, all representations and imageries, Harris rejects all frames and closure at any level of existence or being and presents life as a continuous process of dis-memberment and re-memberment, a perpetual interweaving of plural dimensions. This is also true of man, a creature with both divine and animal capacities rooted in living landscapes (as in early epics), in the "womb of space" "in which our gestation as a species began."<sup>7</sup> Understandably then, his protagonist's experience and vision "transcend the limits of individual existence."<sup>8</sup> Bone's intention is to open up a "human-centred cosmos" (6), and the reconstruction of events which plays itself out in his consciousness as well as the figures involved in them are at once concrete (re-enacting the actual past) and apparitional, i.e. partaking of a mythopoetic and archetypal dimension. So the narrative blends the human

<sup>6</sup> See Wilson Harris's *Carnival Trilogy* and his essay "Comedy and Modern Allegory." See also Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Ulyssean Carnival: Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's *Trilogy*."

<sup>7</sup> On this subject, see *The Radical Imagination, The Womb of Space* and "Apprenticeship to the Furies," 106.

<sup>8</sup> This sentence is borrowed from Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, 197.

with the extra-human and repeatedly shifts from familiar but limited perspectives to the protagonist's awareness of the potential or actual dismantling of their frames, enabling him to perceive, however intermittently and glimmeringly, an underlying multi-dimensional, universal reality alternately seen as God,<sup>9</sup> as a subterranean tradition in the making, the unconscious, or archetypes. It is this process or fluid interweaving of different layers of being which informs the poetic fabric of Harris's writing, the composite metaphors that free language and spirit from conventional formulae. Language itself arises from that elusive, enigmatic reality: "Language," says Bone, "is deeper than frames" (6).

Through a startling orchestration of images, Harris presents a symbiotic Old World-New World epic, in a setting that extends from the Guyanese heartland to the cosmos, blends past, present and future and traces the movements from unconscious and subconscious to consciousness in Bone's psyche, who, as medium of the reconstruction, grows into "a vessel of composite epic" (5). As such, he is also the "diminutive" creator of the "Virgin ship" or vessel of memory and of the voyaging imagination, in which he undertakes his self-confessional journey into the past to "face his trial at the bar of time" (77). The metaphorical "Virgin ship" combines the Virgin archetype already present in *Palace of the Peacock* with the mythical ship which is also a goddess.<sup>10</sup> "Virgin Ship" is the title of the first part of the novel, which opens right after the massacre when Jim (here Jonah) Jones, still alive, is seen approaching a young mother (the first of three virgins) with her child (later "the Child of humanity") to make sure she is dead before he commits suicide. He is on the point of doing so when he is shot by Deacon who was his right-hand "angel" as Bone was his left-hand man. The two men, both born in 1930, are complementary "oppositional twins"<sup>11</sup> at once friends and enemies divided by racial antagonism (48). If Deacon, an orphan adopted by East Indian peasants, is presented as an angel fallen from the stars, Bone, the son of a single mother like so many children in the West Indies, sees himself as the descendant of an eighteenth-century French aristocrat who emigrated to Guyana after accidentally killing his brother and named his plantations *Le Repentir* and *La Pénitence*. As usual with plantation owners, he chose mistresses among his slaves, one of whom was Bone's ancestress. By claiming this ascendancy, Bone presents himself as an offspring of both sides of the colonial system and introduces the theme of guilt and remorse as of possible redemption, for his mother is the second Vir-

<sup>9</sup> See *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*: "I knew that the election of one sun as an absolute deity was an addiction to bias. God is multi-dimensional. Not uni-dimensional," 29.

<sup>10</sup> Harris discovered the myth of the ship goddess in Norman O'Brown's *Love's Body* and felt it validated his own use of this metaphor in his fiction. He quoted Brown in *Carnival*. The beginning of the quotation runs as follows: "The wanderings of the soul after death are pre-natal adventure; a journey by water, in a ship which is also a goddess, to the gates of rebirth." The myth obviously also validates the saving role of the female in *Jonestown* as in all his novels.

<sup>11</sup> In "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity" Harris suggests that the moral vision which inspires innovative art grows out of the conversion of adversarial positions. In spite of their enmity and Bone's jealousy of Deacon, the latter is a continuous presence in Bone's quest and stimulates it.

gin, who wears one of the masks of "the mother of humanity," a compassionate woman who was murdered in 1939, on the eve of World War II, and whose death saved Bone's life. The third Virgin in the narrative is another Marie, a young East Indian girl betrothed, then married to Deacon, with whom Bone is also in love. Like the other "broken" archetypes in the novel, whether predatory or saving figures, the Virgins are both concrete women and different partial faces of an original archetypal "image" which cannot be totally grasped, whose wholeness "baffles us" (166) and remains "unfathomable." Although she is represented in several of her contradictory aspects, Virgin or enslaving Animal Goddess, enchanteress or guiding oracle, compassionate mother but also "dread and fourth virgin" (230), it is her conversion into a "Blessed Fury" and the Virgin Siren's warning music which help Bone discover "varieties of counterpoint" (19) between charismatic leader and sacrificial victim. In other words, the furies, traditionally revenge-goddesses, are divested of violence and transfigured into agents of regeneration. Like all enigmatic substance in Harris's fiction, whether "hidden texts of reality," the seemingly dormant past, the apparently dead or extinct but *living* "fossil strata" (all forms of the universal reality discussed above), archetypes break into consciousness through plural masks and give both life and fiction their re-visionary impulse.

The concrete data of the characters' personal life are woven into a narrative texture which alternates between philosophical dialogues and a visionary metaphorical recreation of experience divested of boundaries in space and time, in which large-scale, natural/cosmic phenomena parallel their reduced, partial expression in human beings and their immediate environment. As a young man, Bone went with Deacon to San Francisco State College thanks to a scholarship funded by his colonial ancestor's legacy. They met Jones, were fascinated by him and returned with him to Guyana to found, like the Maya, a city in the heart of the jungle, the "Conquest Mission" whose adherents would die "within the insatiable stomach of eternity" (14).<sup>12</sup> Jones is one of several embodiments of an archetypal Predator. He is first seen standing "in the whale of the sun" or "throne of conquest... in which he sought to secrete his followers" (14). The image of imprisonment (the whale) and absolute power (which the full sun has represented in Harris's fiction since *Palace of the Peacock*) is later converted into the mask of the tall cat or tiger worn on Carnival day by the murderer of Bone's mother.<sup>13</sup> An equally pregnant and protean imagery in the following passage shows an ordinary concrete object (an old cracked blackboard) opening onto a "dream" cosmic vision "of a steep wave

<sup>12</sup> In "The Quest for Form" Harris describes eternity as an absolute source of terror and beauty which does away with life and death in creative human terms. Idealism is often inspired by a longing for eternity or infinity, which results in a tyranny that despoils and consumes. To consume, for Harris, suggests both destructive greed and the need to consume (get rid of) one's prejudices.

<sup>13</sup> In Amerindian mythology the Sun-god was an absolute fed with the heart and blood of sacrificial victims. It stands in the middle of the Aztec and Maya calendars while the cat (ocelot/tiger) is one of the day signs. So are the vulture and eagle, who represent Deacon, the scavenger and avenger of the Jonestown massacre.

that threaten[s] to overwhelm the Virgin Ship on [Bone's] crossing from 1978 disaster-ridden Jonestown back to 1939 Albuoystown":

[Mr Mageye] dodged behind blackboard and wave. As the ship was about to fall through the roof of the world he occupied a crevice in the blackboard and peered through it as if it were a telescope. At that instant I heard the bells of the Sirens ringing. The Ship righted itself. I heard the voice of the Sirens through the magical bells declaring that Mr Mageye was a rare phenomenon, a genuine and sacred jester. He stood there in the telescopic wave with the look of a gentle Sphinx. The expression passed from his features, he moved back to the front of the blackboard, and he resumed his history lesson (33).

Mr Mageye is here both living teacher and one of the three Magi who guide Bone in the netherworld. The Sirens, propitious rather than dreadful, deceiving goddesses are related to the Virgin figures. The passage blends several time perspectives (1978 and 1939 but also 1985 when Bone begins his Dreambook and 1994, the year of its editorship), which brings to light parallel situations and motivations and intimates that the past itself changes, is active in the present, and offers meanings to which one may have been blind: "the spatialities inserted into time... are different" (105). Bone's quest through this multi-dimensional past and the many questions he asks himself and Mr Mageye in his backward and forward journey help him progress through the antinomies of being and motivation between which man must constantly freely discriminate to avoid submitting blindly to fate and/or ideology. The inter-relatedness between moral choice or moral being and creativity (see note 12) gives substance to Bone's narrative from the moment he breaks his pact with Jones, aware that the "dread closure" of such a pact underlies "the death of the arts" (17). He borrows from Beckett the title of his Dream-book: *Imagination Dead Imagine* which Jones too had made his motto in the Conquest Mission (15, 90) though the perverse effects of his longing for infinity was to issue in a death-wish. Whereas when Bone begins to ponder on the meaning of "Imagine," it becomes an exhortation to creativeness<sup>14</sup> and to a recognition of seminal life in death: "One must re-imagine death as a live fossil apparition. Imagination Dead Imagine" (232).

Chapter II, "Giants of Chaos," starts with Bone coming out of the "Cave of the Moon" (45) where he had taken refuge after the tragedy, a Lazarus surfacing three days after his psychological death. The shift in this chapter from the evocation of Bone's and Deacon's initial motivation for joining Jones to the myth-making dramatization of the betrothal between the ten-year old Deacon and Marie, the Wilderness Virgin, soon yields to a breathtaking vision of "archetypal oceans and skies" (51), a spatial arena proportionate to Deacon's "celestial ambition" to emulate the great conquerors of the past and "duel with eternity... the Titans, the tricksters of heaven" (52). This juxtaposition of Deacon's aspirations with his forthcoming marriage adumbrates the correlation between will-to-power and a sexuality steeped in violence, the main

<sup>14</sup> See Harris's essay entitled "Imagination Dead Imagine." Note also the ambivalence of Harris's interpretation, similar to the distinction he makes between actions that look alike yet are different in intention and effect like the sexuality of the rapist as opposed to sex shorn of violence, or the ambivalent nature of fire.

symptom of a diseased society. The conversion of violence into a creative and redeeming sexuality in both man and nature is, as we shall see presently, a major strand in the narrative. "Tricksters of heaven" relates to Caribbean mythology also represented by the Goddess Kali, venerated by East Indians who make up about forty percent of the Guyanese population. The Trickster, on the other hand, was originally the African spider god Anansi, who became identified with the beaten down slave who rebels against his master and escapes oppression by his cleverness.<sup>15</sup> The divine, the human and the animal thus merge in his figure. However, if in Bone's vision of Deacon's wild ambitions as a boy, the tricksters are heroes and "giants" he hopes to conquer and surpass as a compensation for the trauma of deprivation he experienced as a child (63), for Mr Mageye and Bone himself, they are also poor, labouring folk, "ant-like and enigmatic" (66), while later Bone sees in the Giants people in all stations of life, "all parties across the generations of colonial and post-colonial histories" (156). The tricksters, later identified as "tricksters of Spirit" (151), are ambiguous and ambivalent figures, whose mutability is here seen as a capacity to cross the borders between different dimensions, also "to relinquish cleverness... in favour of sifting every obstacle to truth in the fabric of the Self" (151) and later partake of the metamorphosis of the cosmic Spider into Saviour-Child (205). The trickster's role and Mr Mageye's persona as "Magus-Jester of history" illustrate Harris's conception of comedy as a process of conversion initiated by an awareness that any existential predicament potentially contains its reverse, that any kind of fact or behaviour are the very doorways *through* which one can tend towards deeper, antinomial proportions. "Comedy," a major character suggests in *Carnival*, "is reversible fiction" (*Carnival* 90).

"Giants of Chaos" also evokes the other, deeper space envisioned through conversion. As events are seen to ripple into far-off consequences, so the storm in which Bone is caught (it recurs in different spaces in the narrative) is an expansion of the miniature storm or "chaos" (22) he had caused by shaking amid leaves and bushes out of fear of Jones when hiding from him just after the massacre. It is comparable to the "Butterfly Effect" in Chaos theory, i.e., "a sensitive dependence on initial conditions," "the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York" (Gleick 8). Peering into the depths of space through Mr Mageye's camera, Bone comments:

At first I saw nothing but Chaos. I saw floating planks from the forests of King Midas, I saw floating cargoes of South American rubber bound for the Golden Man in the kingdom of El Dorado, I saw the mastheads under broken slave-ships, I saw frail residue like the beard of Titans, I saw celestial mathematics written into rockets and sails upon space stations. An air of wreckage hung over them in the degree that civilizations had foundered but the fleet was now half-a-float upon ocean and sky (51).

The storm is a recurring phenomenon in Harris's fiction, both real and metaphorical, which exteriorizes the inner turmoil experienced by the quester

<sup>15</sup> His predicament is represented in the Limbo dance with the dancer passing spread-eagled like a spider under a lowered pole. On this subject see Wilson Harris, *History Fable and Myth*.

as he approaches the limits of the known and is on the edge of lost worlds, of vestiges formerly buried in the unconscious, the universal dimension towards which Bone travels in his "Dream." The passage just quoted is reminiscent of a similar vision in *Carnival*: "The storm clung to pupils of devastation everywhere and nowhere. I looked into the ghost of chaos as into a raging, human cosmos" (*Carnival* 91), which suggests a parallel world animated by equal forces to that of the living. The débris of former times Bone sees through Mr Mageye's camera are also "relics of Spirit" (151), whose revival prod him further in his journey.

In the universal dimension Harris calls "the womb of space" Bone meets several archetypal figures, the Predator lurking "beneath every fallen and falling creature" (73), man and beast of terrifying beauty, but also the "divine huntsman who hangs on the Cross in... our ragged flesh, to hold the Predator at bay when humanity is in the greatest danger" (51), a figure first envisioned in *Palace of the Peacock* like the archetypal Virgin and who, contrary to Lord Death, who encouraged Bone to kill the Predator and to "walk with a Bomb of environment disasters... to blow up the globe" (75), advises him against revenge. Another archetype or "sphere within ourselves" (55) Bone meets in the netherworld is the Old God/ King/ Prisoner "chained to eternity" (115) who personifies authority and potential freedom and whose sacrificial dismemberment partakes of a dissolution of the frame that opens the way to a free remembrance of humanity. The nature of freedom, its burden and responsibilities as opposed to hedonistic permissiveness, is one of Bone's major preoccupations. So is the mystery of injustice, a recurring feature in Harris's fiction. It was Deacon's and Bone's anger at injustice that drove them to forge a pact with Jones. The purpose of Bone's dreaming return to the hell of Jonestown is to transform his former anger and "authoritarian fixture of wrath" (121) and to assess his responsibility as survivor, to share the huntsman/Christ's instinct "to put numinous flesh... upon the Bone of wasted lives that survivors of holocaust harbour in themselves" (106), in other words to revive within himself the "growing, maturing dead," invisible part of a chain of being Harris described elsewhere as "the subtle linkages of a parent-Imagination, in, through and beyond all creatures, all elements" (*The Four Banks of the River of Space* 125).

It is impossible within the limits of a single essay to do justice to the rich tight density of the many-layered imageries in the narrative, their deepening and protean significance, as they generate the conversion of the protagonist's vision and the concurrent transfiguration of tragedy. In the third part of the novel, the "foundations of cities" Bone is in search of are equally the enigmatic ground or roots of lost cities and imploded cultures and the original premises or "hidden texts" (99)<sup>16</sup> sustaining his creative process as writer and builder of "new architectures out of the rubble of tradition" (84). Indeed the rationale behind his journey forwards and backwards in time is "to salvage a broken

<sup>16</sup> A major aspect of Bone's quest, especially in "Foundations of Cities" is its self-reflexiveness. Bone is both writing and "written" (4). Harris's fictions are "texts of reality," not in the sense of a Leavisite "unmediated reality" but because he believes that the life of the imagination is "more real than the real world" and can transform both the arts and man's behaviour.

world and reclaim its bearing on a living future" (112). In his exploration of individual and historical past, his recovering memory stimulates his growing consciousness. But the frontiers between layers of being are themselves mobile and recede, and no Harrisian protagonist ever reaches finally its extreme limit or enigmatic source of creation since this would mean facing an absolute or a Creator who, like the archetypes discussed above, can only be glimpsed through its/His partial manifestations or plural Masks. The same applies to the relics of experience whose deadness is only apparent. There are, Bone discovers, "breathlines infused into architectures of space in science and fiction and poetry and art" (143). The arousal to perceptible livingness of fragments of a deeper reality (relics of the past and source of creativeness) is the fruit of a meeting between its own resurrectionary eruption and the quester's vision. This is the fundamental dynamic or "re-visionary momentum" (111) of both Harris's writing and his character's Dream-book.

"The reverend has a propensity for virgins.../After dey is pregnant for him we get them as wives/All our first born are the children of God." So runs D'Aguiar's irony in *Bill of Rights* (19). In *Jonestown* too the leader's promiscuity in real life is at the core of his imperial mission, "the sanctification of the beastly brothel is... [t]he art of colonialism" (123). On his return to Jonestown, Bone realizes that when founding a Utopian new Rome in the rainforest, he, Deacon and Jones brought with them all their prejudices about women and nature. In the course of his quest he begins to see the animal goddess as his foster-mother whose "numinous paganism" (128) can purge sex of violence:

The act of penetration of... Virgin space, 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).

Bone envisions this act of creation in one of the most striking episodes in the novel, an intercourse ("incalculable spatial phenomenon" [133]) between a log turned phallic tree and a "genesis-cloud... in the womb of space" (132). To grasp its full implications, one must recall Bone's earlier perception that the Amerindian women Jones "swallowed" and their silent men-folk were "ghosts of Atlantis" whose sacred places had been pillaged and were lost like Atlantis. As he discerns the redeeming potential of the past, it is a *broken* (dismembered though mending) phallus which, as opposed to Jonah's "climb into... eternity's closure of time" (133), penetrates the genesis-cloud. Bone himself, he realizes, contains his extinct antecedents and is partly the embodiment of "lost tribes... Atlantean peoples" (131), while Jonestown lies "nameless under the sea." He visualizes an ancient, extinct but now reviving storm raping Plato's lost city and the parallel engulfment yet perceptible outline of Jonestown and of "the drowned, pre-Columbian New World, since the European conquest, in every mutilated landscape" (135-6). But a break in the chain of elements enables Bone to see that

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).

Bone's vision of a fruitful marriage between heaven and earth is paralleled in the last part of the novel, "Roraima's Scorpions," by his own re-enactment

of Deacon's wedding and honeymoon night with Marie, the wilderness Virgin. Deacon, who fell into a ravine and died after killing Jones and saving Bone, is absent from the reconstruction but his ghostly living mask on Bone's shoulders enables the latter to understand Deacon's motivations and makes it clear that any severance of their joint involvement with Jones would be self-deceptive. Bone's intercourse with the Virgin is the more important as the two men represent different dimensions of being (possibly, the two faces of the trickster): Bone together with his inner skeleton self is the human creature with "abnormal lucidity" (5) and in search of a soul, as the prefatory ballad suggests. Deacon, fallen from the skies, keeps falling through the chapter. He falls through the void of the colony, of disfigured landscapes and of a declining civilization; above all he falls through the void of memory and psyche which Bone scans, and his fall links the heights and the depths of which humanity partakes. The saviour child, desired by the folk and who shares with Bone the role of Lazarus, was born of Deacon's marriage with the Virgin. But its resurrection at the end of the novel seems to me to be the fruit of the two men's re-enacted intercourse with her, of Deacon's torment and remorse (the Dream-book is also "an epic of repentance" [181]) and of Bone's recovering memory, imagination and expanding consciousness.

Before this last vision, however, Bone returns to the wedding's banquet hall where he is made aware of an argument between Jones and Deacon who had angrily warned the leader against the coming "end of the world" (200) but accepted his lies out of political necessity or fear. In the hall too a mythopoeic scene reveals the ineradicable moral ambivalence at the heart of all being. The multiple arms of the East Indian goddess Kali wheel strangled female children exploited out of economic necessity. Anansi, once the saviour of transported slaves, has acquired an appetite to rule in the banquet hall of history, like that other Trickster Prometheus who lied to cover his rebellion because he saw his chance to "rule with the gift of fire [therapeutic and injurious ammunition]. . . from whose ash would spring. . . the magnetic beauty and charm of the Predator" (207). Hence Bone's intuition that already in 1954 "Jonestown lay submerged in the collective unconscious" (197) as if part of a latent will-to-power. When the roof of the banquet hall collapses,<sup>17</sup> Bone feels that Jones lives and "will re-emerge from the salvaged banquet hall in space in another charismatic crusade" (220–1). But Bone himself is at last prepared to assume responsibility for "a lie which taints creation" (207), and he sails towards Roraima, a high mountain in the rainforest on the border of Guyana, Brazil and Venezuela, sacred to the Amerindians and reputed to be the seat of El Dorado, rich in diamonds and gold.<sup>18</sup> Since *Palace of the Peacock*, El Dorado

<sup>17</sup> This is an adaptation of the crash from which the poet Simonides alone was saved by Castor and Pollux. Simonides remembered where the other guests had been sitting in the banquet hall and was able to tell who the dead were. This is recorded by Frances Yates as the origin of the "art of memory." See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Marches of El Dorado* the British explorer Michael Swan quotes Sir Walter Raleigh on this subject. Swan himself had dreamed of climbing the mountain since boyhood, stimulated by Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. He describes his actual climb of the mountain in 1955 and compares it to his visit of the ruins of Maya cities in the forests of Southern Mexico, 190.

(city of Gold, city of God) in Harris's fiction has been the ambivalent object of man's greed and of his never finally achieved spiritual redemption. For Bone, sailing to Roraima means journeying towards a lost primitive world which may hold a seed of regeneration as well as towards his innermost self where, still wearing Deacon's mask, he faces at last his inner deep-seated primitive judges. Only then does he fully recover his memory, remembering that after his honeymoon night Deacon had gone to Roraima, "the soul of living landscapes" (232), an exquisite garden nevertheless infested with scorpions. His purpose was to get a fortune for his newborn child through whom he was hoping to rule the world. In his pursuit of material rather than spiritual riches he was inoculated with the scorpion's venom and made immune to pain on condition that he would eschew intercourse with Marie and not touch his child in the cradle. When he did so on his return, the child turned into a leaf of stone.

Through the successive stages of his quest Bone has been besieged by fear, terror and dread and has repeatedly shrunk from leaping into what seemed a terrifying void in landscape and psyche in spite of the huntsman's encouragement (cf. 75). Now that still under Deacon's mask and accused of Deacon's deception he opens his memory and his conscience to the murder, however unintentional, of the saviour child, he sees Roraima, the "dread and fourth Virgin" as healing "dread mother of Compassion" (231). Only then does he agree to identify fully with Deacon and to bear responsibility for a "fallen, perpetually falling humanity" (203). When he consents to be put on trial and is driven by his judges over the edge of the cliff, he is finally leaping into the void, the first of Harris's protagonists to do so of his own accord. He is, I think, re-enacting the fall of man, experiencing what Harris calls "the gravity of freedom," at once its serious, sometimes terrifying responsibilities and a fall into the "womb of space" and "the unfinished genesis of the imagination" (75). But like Donne caught by a noose when he falls along the cliff in *Palace of the Peacock*, Bone's leap into the void is arrested and he falls "into the net of music, the net of the huntsman Christ," suspended in that area of the imagination where life and death overlap and confronted with both the Predator and the resurrected Child, free to keep moving towards the source of creation though he will never reach it.

*Jonestown* is a novel of extraordinary scope which brings together and further develops the major themes of Harris's considerable opus in a narrative as open-ended as his earlier fictions. An "unfinished genesis" itself, it evokes in his bold, untrammelled metaphorical language the unending interplay between the material and the immaterial, the concrete and the "apparitional" perspectives informing the "texts of reality" that gestate in Bone's consciousness. As in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, the narrative combines with equal plausibility a pre-Columbian perception of the universe (in particular the Maya conception of time), with an awareness of alternative or parallel realities postulated by Quantum physics, illustrated in particular in Bone's recognition of similar structures in different spheres ("celestial mathematics"/

"Mathematics of Chaos").<sup>19</sup> Though located in a little known, seldom mediated country, the novel portrays with unusual power the illnesses of contemporary society anywhere: unbridled ambition, the false spirituality of charismatic leaders or the perversion of initially idealistic ends. Above all, it implicitly warns against the behavioural mechanisms through which societies keep operating, the revenge-syndrome (personified in the Furies) equally devastating in the West and the Third World. The reversal of these mechanisms, however, is envisaged by the individual consciousness alone. In his self-analytical journey, Bone gradually recognizes the deepest roots of his (and man's) behaviour and the energizing impetus of archetypal forces, the inescapable ambivalence of human nature, though never in a simple dualistic way. Rather, contradictory impulses overlap and each emotion, feeling, motive contains the seed of its opposite which makes conversion possible. Dread, the prevailing emotion through Bone's quest, can give rise to violence but is also interwoven with repentance (221), "the farthestmost evolution Mind—despite its addiction to cruelty—may begin to contemplate" (231). In his innermost self Dread finally emerges in conjunction with Compassion and cosmic Love. Like humanity as a whole, he survives partial extinctions within himself, spurred on by a conviction that, contrary to what Jones asserts, "the heart of the wild is susceptible to change" (215). But as in Harris's earlier fiction, the future depends on a renaissance of the imagination, of consciousness and, increasingly, on a spiritual regeneration which, for Bone, takes the form of a "re-conceptualization of the Child" (208). *Jonestown* is animated by what I have called elsewhere "a mysticism in reverse, a descent towards inner transcendence" (Maes-Jelinek, "Another Future for Post-Colonial Studies?" 6), as the very end of the novel makes clear:

We stood face to face, Dread and I, Predator and I... I was naked in the lighted Darkness of the Self. The Child rode on the Predator's groaning back. Lightness becomes a new burden upon the extremities of galaxies in which humanity sees itself attuned to the sources and origins of every memorial star that takes it closer and closer—however far removed—to the unfathomable body of the Creator (234).

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<sup>19</sup> Harris's art of fiction can be compared to a conception of science recently described by the Belgian Nobel Prize scientist, Ilya Prigogine: "We witness the emergence of a science no longer limited to simplified idealized situations but which confronts us to the complexity of the real world, a science which makes it possible for human creativity to be 'lived' as the singular expression of a fundamental feature common to all levels of nature (translation and italics mine), *La fin des certitudes*, 16.

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