

## CHAPTER 3

### 'Carnival' and creativity in Wilson Harris's fiction

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Before or after dying [Shakespeare] found himself in the presence of God and told Him: 'I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself.' The voice of the Lord answered him from the whirlwind: 'Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.'

Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*

Vision and idea mingled into a sensitive carnival

*Palace of the Peacock*

The reference to carnival in Wilson Harris's first novel occurs at a crucial moment when the crew travelling on the river in pursuit of the Amerindian folk are completely disorientated and face the terror of the unknown as they experience their second death. The whole passage shows that already then Harris was using the word carnival as a metaphor for creativity and was also expressing its dual nature:

Vision and idea mingled into a sensitive carnival that turned the crew into the fearful herd where he [Vigilance] clung with his eye of compassion to his precarious and dizzy vertical hold and perched on the stream of the cliff. The light of space changed, impinging upon his eyeball and lid numerous grains of sound and motion that were the suns and moons of all space and time. The fowls of the air danced and wheeled on invisible lines that stretched taut between the ages of light and snapped every now and then into lightning executions of dreaming men when each instant ghost repaired the wires again in the form of an inquisitive hanging eye and bird.<sup>1</sup>

This extraordinary vision suggests that the very experience which turns the crew into a fearful herd stimulates in Vigilance a perception of creation on a cosmic scale. He has travelled with them so far but he is ascending towards light while the crew are caught in the

'stream of death.' My point here is that a similar experience gives rise to opposite reactions, that the catastrophic event which the crew are re-living imprisons them in a deadlock of terror and even stimulates violence among them, yet is also the source of a rebirth of imagination.

*Palace of the Peacock* is essentially about the saving role of imagination, while the nature of creativity and its possible regenerative influence on man's moral behaviour is a major theme in all Harris's fictions. As one character says in his latest novel, 'a living language is a medium of *creativity* in morality' (74). I intend to concentrate on *Carnival* but first wish to show that this novel brings to a head, and is a synthesis of, several aspects of Harris's fiction which have matured into a many-layered whole.

Wilson Harris has emphasized different aspects of the creative implications of carnival in several novels giving perhaps the impression at an early stage that he was probing various directions. But it seems that, like Stevenson at the end of *Heartland*, he keeps going backwards and forwards, and this seems a feature of the exploration in which he himself is engaged. We just saw that in *Palace of the Peacock* carnival is a metaphor for creation, while 'vision and idea' suggest both a visionary or imaginative perception of the world and abstract thought. Another aspect of the multiplicity of meanings inherent in Harris's use of carnival is illustrated more concretely towards the end of *The Whole Armour*, which links carnival with history. Christo returns to his village after spending some time in the jungle where he was thought to have died. He explains to Sharon, the woman he loves, that he met there a party of Arawaks who could have belonged to two or three centuries earlier. Sharon laughs at him and explains that the Catholic mission has been staging a carnival, so that the Indians were actually disguised players reenacting the last battle between Arawaks and Caribs. But Christo rejects this realistic version. The Indians and the runaway slave he has met were real to him, whether they actually existed or were envisioned by him. He feels they put him together again after he had been dismembered like them, running in the jungle, a dismemberment that re-enacts the historical past of Caribbean man and prefigures Christo's execution for a crime he has not committed. This juxtaposition of two versions of history, one that is merely mimetic carnival, the other resting on a deep and intuitive insight into the psychological effects of events, points to later fusions of the two.

The next allusion to carnival occurs in *Heartland*, in which it is practically used as a synonym for creative in the phrase 'carnival

clue to the past.'<sup>2</sup> In *The Eye of the Scarecrow* the narrator comments on the 1948 strike in Guyana and feels the need to peer 'into the heart of the universal carnival for the grimmest redeeming clue of an open memory.'<sup>3</sup> Here the 'universal carnival' not only means the 'carnival of history,' but already evokes a universal 'comedy of existence' such as Wilson Harris was to create in his latest novel. As in *Heartland*, 'carnival' is associated with 'clue,' which refers to one of those smaller incidents or psychological effects buried in the unconscious and overlooked by official history, clues or 'messages' which can be picked up again and open the way to a revision of past conflicts. What compels the narrator to look more closely at the past for a redeeming clue is that the rebelliousness of the Guyana Strikers expresses a 'nihilism of spirit'<sup>4</sup> which, ironically, closely resembles 'the unprejudiced reality of freedom'<sup>5</sup> which he seeks to achieve. So whereas a similar experience produced two very different reactions in the crew in *Palace*, here the strikers and the narrator are moved by a conception of freedom which *looks* the same, yet is very different. What matters in both cases is the irony inherent in each incident, each human reaction, since it is both itself yet also susceptible of turning into its opposite. Such irony is also, as we shall see, a significant feature in the author's view of creativity. Obviously, it invites a probing into deeper layers of experience and the innermost recesses of the self to approach the unconscious motives and attitudes that inform human behaviour.

Although it may not have been immediately obvious, already in his early novels Wilson Harris was using carnival, a major cultural event in the Caribbean, in much the same way as he had used Caribbean history, searching *through* (through and beyond are words he frequently uses) its obvious significance for a deeper meaning.<sup>6</sup> He was also moving towards the kind of self-reflexive fiction of which *Carnival* is such a striking example. However, unlike much contemporary self-reflexive fiction, Harris's does not question the 'reality' of its own material, does not deny Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' but is rather a meditation on the process of creation. On re-reading *Palace of the Peacock* recently, I realized that this self-reflexivity was already present there though in a less conspicuous form than in later novels. Most critics so far, including myself, have presented Donne as the main character even while drawing attention to his dual personality and to the I-narrator as his nameless other self. In the light of later novels the transformation of Donne's vision remains as essential as ever and is part of the narrator's quest, but the latter's role is just as important since from beginning to end it is he, the nameless narrator, who identifies successively with the other

characters and draws the conclusion to their experience. In the part dealing with their 'second death,' Vigilance as a kind of alter-ego to the narrator, takes up his visionary role and penetrates 'every material mask and label': 'Vigilance had seen clear in the bowels of the nameless kinship and identity ... and in one stroke it had liberated him from death and adversity.'<sup>7</sup>

The penetration of masks as an essential aspect of fiction writing or exploration on the part of the major character is more fully developed in *Tumatumari*. Through the main character's reconstruction of her family's and Guyana's history the mask acquires a double function. It is, in fact, used in a variety of ways including a meta-physical significance. But it is enough for my present purpose to understand that all the masks worn by Prudence's family, as well as the masks of nature ('mask of phenomenon,' 'mask of the sun,'<sup>8</sup>) are reversible. Or to put it differently, they contain and offer the key to their own partial dissolution or removal. The blinding mask of the sun is 'translated' at the end and becomes a smiling Gorgon's head. The mask which hides what is beneath yet can lose its rigid immobility and become, in Harrisian terms, a moving flowering head, announces the narrator's definition in *Carnival*: 'Carnival hides us from ourselves yet reveals us to ourselves' (86). This, however, calls for an important qualification: the penetration of a mask does not mean that one discovers Truth behind it but another partial truth or mask and so *ad infinitum*. Other elements in *Tumatumari* foreshadow *Carnival* such as the presentation of Roi, Prudence's husband, as both king (as his name makes clear) and clown. For the first time also, Wilson Harris makes a complex use of the notion of game which, in its major significance, is not just the great name of history but the game of creation as the last words of the novel indicate: 'Game of the Conception. The Great Game.'

Towards the end of the novel when the conventional vision of the historian Tenby is transformed through the reconstruction of his role by his daughter Prudence, we are told that 'from within the ultimate seal of death [Tenby's is a post-mortem vision] he saw his historical function now in a new *comical* light like a soiled garment on his back.' Further down, a 'comical evolution' takes place.<sup>10</sup> I used to wonder why 'comical' and couldn't see at first why Tenby's new awareness was 'comic.' Since then, Wilson Harris has repeatedly used the word 'comedy' with reference to the 'drama of consciousness' which takes place in his novels. *Black Marsden* is a *tabula rasa* comedy. *Genesis of the Clowns* is subtitled 'A comedy of Light,' and the narrator refers several times to the 'comedy of divinity' through which the 'genesis of the clowns' occurs.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, 'comedy' and

'genesis' are used as synonyms in this novel.<sup>12</sup> *The Tree of the Sun* is also a 'twentieth-century comedy of divinity' which on one level dramatizes 'an unresolved ancient carnival feud of the parentage of the cosmos'<sup>13</sup> and presents a character named Harlequin. Since the nameless narrator of *Palace of the Peacock* Harris has used major characters of a narrator called 'Idiot nameless' or the Fool (*The Eye of the Scarecrow* or *Companions of the Day and Night*). The clown in *The Angel at the Gate* is Anancy, the well-known West Indian trickster already present in *Palace in the Peacock*. In this novel too the extreme positions of 'emperor' and 'clown' are brought together in one character.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly then, the carnivalesque elements I have referred to are present in Harris's fiction from the very beginning. Although they appear with increasing frequency in later novels and are often given a different emphasis, they were part, from the first, of his conception of creativity and fiction. The penetration of masks to unravel deeply buried and unconscious residues of individual and historical experience; the need to trace and elucidate real motivations behind paradoxical or deceptive appearances; the presentation of characters associated with carnival but also representative of the sharp contrasts to be found in poor and/or colonial societies: the King, the Clown, the nameless Fool who identifies with the exploited or eclipsed majority, the Harlequin; the increasing self-reflexivity which intensifies Harris's fusion of 'vision and idea,' the metaphorical and the abstract; all come together and illustrate his notion of comedy as represented in *Carnival*.

Volumes have been written on the ambiguities of comedy and its metaphysical implications. Wilson Harris's own conception is actualized in his fiction but can also be inferred from his essays, particularly *The Womb of Space* and the more recent 'Comedy and Modern Allegory.'<sup>15</sup> That he had *The Divine Comedy* fairly early in mind is obvious from his use of its opening lines as an epigraph to *Heartland*, published more than 20 years ago. What was not so clear then was his revision of Dante's concept of comedy nor the link between the epigraph and the inconclusive ending of the novel. The title of Dante's poem has, of course, been interpreted in many different ways. It is enough to recall that quite apart from his dramatization of a theological system or divine plan as conceived in his time, Dante's beautiful vision is a 'happy ending' of a deep spiritual significance. Like Dante, Harris advocates a spiritual rebirth of humanity and in many of his novels the characters are in search of paradise. Whatever they mean by it, it is often perceived at the beginning of their quest as some kind of absolute similar to the

traditional view (see Donne in *Palace of the Peacock* or Magellan in *Da Silva Da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*). But Wilson Harris presents this thirst for an absolute as a destructive incorrigible human tendency.

The reference to Dante in *Carnival* is clear since, apart from the three epigraphs from his poem, the novel is explicitly called a 'divine comedy of existence' (43) and a 'spiritual biography' (23). It also deals in a very different way from *Palace* with the search for El Dorado which in Harris's fiction often represents the quest for paradise. The main character is called Everyman Masters, a name which allegorizes the kind of paradox that informs Harris's concept of creation and the novel as a whole. It does not merely juxtapose opposite perceptions of man, the singled-out ruler and the average man, but is a way of suggesting that one contains the other. In his first life Masters is a plantation overseer in the colonial Inferno of New Forest (probably Guyana). In what may be called his second life he becomes an exploited Everyman working with other West Indians in a London factory. Like *Palace of the Peacock*, the novel opens with an act of revenge, Masters' 'second death' in London in 1982, when he is stabbed by a mysterious stranger after spending part of the night with one Jane Fisher. She is the white double of a black Jane Fisher who, 25 years earlier in New Forest, had attracted him to her house where he was killed by her jealous husband, though he had been mistaken for another overseer.

Masters' first death put an end to his role as king of a colonial age though not to the kind of exploitation for which he was partly responsible since he himself experiences it in the London factory. Its main effect on him was to stimulate a judgment of himself and his age:

It set in train the most thoroughgoing analysis of hallucinated layers of being in himself, the most profound inquiry of which he was inwardly capable into everything he had seemed to be, everything he had aped, had done, his apprenticeship, the College he had attended, his parentage, cosmic and otherwise ... the antics of Carnival, the heart of El Dorado, the cross-personal/cross-cultural relationships he had tended to brush aside as adventitious or hollow myth. (87)

This passage sums up the subject of the novel and can also be read as the effect of Masters' second death, which stimulates the I-narrator to reconstruct Masters' life. The 'second death,' already envisioned

through a major part in *Palace of the Peacock*, may have been inspired by the Apocalypse (XX, 4). But whereas in both the Apocalypse and *The Divine Comedy* it refers to a period of damnation, expiation is here altered into an opportunity to revise past errors. As a matter of fact, Masters experiences several deaths and resurrections, each of which makes possible his and the narrator's understanding of yet another slice of experience.

The I-narrator is called Jonathan Weyl. Masters can be his Virgil and guide into 'the Inferno and Purgatory of the twentieth-century world' (15) only because he himself has been both 'plantation overseer and hunted beast' (16). As he tells Jonathan, 'I could not be your guide if I had not known the hell of the senses' (86). Although it is mainly Masters' lives which are recreated, Jonathan's role is just as important because the novel grows out of their dialogue and joint interpretation of the past so that the narrative mode is not simply, in Coleridge's words, an 'appropriate form' but the very source of the novel's significance as of the significance of carnival and comedy. Already in the opening chapters we realize that Jane Fisher is performing a play and that the comedy is a 'revision' or 'rehearsal.' The reconstruction is a dream, which, as in earlier novels, underlies its subjectivity. Moreover, Jonathan does not dream alone but through part of the narrative at least in conjunction, as it were, with his wife Amaryllis. Since theirs is a 'marriage of cultures' (she is European, he of mixed ancestry), his creation is clearly cross-cultural and in a sense androgynous.<sup>16</sup> As Jonathan descends into the Inferno with Masters, he meets several character-masks in whose lives he discerns significance clues of interpretation, the 'carnival clues' perceived in earlier novels. What he makes of these under Masters' guidance shapes the narrative. Already in *The Tree of the Sun* some of the characters were aware of their creator. This is now further developed into a mutual creation: Jonathan is both Masters' 'creation' and his 'father-spirit' (31), his 'spirit-clerk' and his 'parent-spark' (54).

The 'mutuality', or dialogue between the narrator and his guide appears in the very first recreated episode. Masters, aged nine, is seen playing on the beach with his older cousin Thomas. He cuts his hand on a bone and bandages the wound with a rag which Thomas tears away, perhaps involuntarily. But like his namesake in the gospel, he seems in need to *prove* the wound, which is only the first in a series inflicted on humanity. The bone or knife brings to the narrator's mind the *true* shaman's axe, and there follows a brief poetic reminder of the catastrophe evoked in *Palace of the Peacock* which ends nevertheless with the resurrection of the folk into the

tree of flesh and blood. The implication here is that the slice or cut 'dismembers' (23) yet also gives occasion to 're-member' in two senses: the dismemberment and remembering of the human community (138) and the remembering of its wounds.

Memory now appears personified by a *false* shaman from whom the child Masters ran away, apparently because he had heard rumours of a rapist in the neighbourhood. Although, as a personification of memory, the false shaman is a stimulus to creation, he is 'Memory true and false' (26) and therefore a warning to Masters, then Jonathan, of the dangerous deceptions which memory can exert.<sup>17</sup> On reaching home after running away from him, Masters catches sight of his weeping mother through an open door. It reminds him of her suffering when she was expecting him and had been made pregnant by a man who didn't marry her so that she contemplated an abortion. Masters' legal father had then agreed to wear the 'mask of the cuckold' (28) to save the child's existence. Now Masters re-enters his mother's womb, as it were, and fully senses the implications of his own salvation. He sees the resemblance between the humiliations he would have suffered, had he been raped by the false shaman, the kind of humiliation that engenders violence, and the humiliation his mother suffered which was instead converted into 'the genius of love' (30), into 'a vision through the abortion of an age' (29).

This episode therefore suggests a distinction between two kinds of humiliation which can both be ascribed to a 'psychology of rape' (29). They look alike, as the nihilism of the strikers and genuine freedom look alike in *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, yet they differ, and this is one of the many paradoxes and ironies on which the novel is built. On the other hand, the transformation of humiliation thanks to the 'spirit of care' (29) of Masters' stepfather reminds Jonathan of the 'transfigurative wound' (30). The specific role of fiction, as he says, of his fiction, in particular, is to translate the wounds of humanity (31).<sup>18</sup> And this expresses another paradox since the wound becomes creative. That such translation is the most difficult thing to achieve is shown in the next chapter in which Jonathan tries to understand through Thomas, now an other indispensable guide, 'the blind collision between worlds trying to prove each other' (33). So the first episode already brings to light two essential aspects of Harris's comedy. One is the dramatization of attitudes or forms of behaviour which are superficially similar yet basically different. The second is the possible visionary transformation of one kind of behaviour into its opposite. We shall see how this is illustrated in the rest of the novel.

After Masters' disappearance from the beach, Thomas anxiously runs back into town after him and in his haste collides with a black woman carrying a basket of eggs. She takes Thomas with her to show him where she lives so that he can later refund her loss. Walking towards her tenement, Thomas (and Jonathan with him) discovers the colonial inferno of the depressive '20s. They reach the market place just after a schooner moored to the market wharf has caught fire and been reduced to burnt sails and hull. The burnt schooner and the market place evoke the original 'collision of cultures' between Amerindians and European conquerors but Jonathan now sees that, although the conquerors plundered and raped, there was yet 'a glimmering fiction of mutual desire for protective law, protective spirit' (46), which prompts him to attempt to trace 'an initial unity of Mankind':

It was this nebulousness of initial grace that deepened the fire in my eyes. I needed to descend with the vessel of Night into accompanying initials of the mastery of the globe, master-builder, master-philosopher, master-salesman, master of arts. I needed to descend with the schooner of Night into equally related initials of the servant of the globe, servant-builder, servant-philosopher, servant of arts. How creatively interchangeable were they – mastery and service – upon the unborn/born person in the Carnival body of space? I needed to descend into eclipsed initials of the rebirth of spirit within Masters and Thomas and Alice and the marble woman and numerous others. We were partial figures on the deck of Night. Such partial figuration of soul was a signal of terrifying wholeness. Terrifying in an age that had settled for fragmentation, for polarization, as the basis of security. (46)

This passage sums up Jonathan's creative process, his attempt to probe first one kind of partiality, that of the masters of the globe, then another, the Servants', in order to uncover a 'mutuality' which can lead to 'the rebirth of the Spirit,' in order also to approach a wholeness of which all the 'partial figures partake, yet cannot finally reach. Towards the end of the novel he sees himself on the burning schooner and discovers within it an 'untainted' or 'unblemished' core, an 'intact flower on a blasted tree' (165), which express the paradox of survival (164), of the mysterious intact reality which has outlived the calamities of conquest and the middle passage or, put differently, the nothingness that is somethingness.

Meanwhile on the Market place, Thomas and the black woman witness another collision between Johnny the Czar (the woman's common-law husband) and one Charlotte Bartleby. Johnny is the carnival king whose mask resembles Masters'; he is a shadowy counterpart of the rich El-Doradan plantation king. In spite of the hidden voice of conscience which prompts him to be cautious, he and Charlotte face each other like two devouring crabs. Violence is avoided then, but when he gets home drunk he vents his anger on his wife, using the incident of the broken eggs as an excuse. When he threatens to strike her, Thomas who has followed her, jumps through the cart wheel in front of their cave and stabs him. Johnny, who is first shown carrying a heavy burden (or the globe) on his shoulders, naturally belongs with the exploited, and we just saw that he is not insensitive to the voice of conscience. But as carnival Czar, he is a minor dictator in the plantation tenements where, as Jonathan says, 'revolution was taboo' (65). He could represent the fool or harlequin of Caribbean carnival and, as we know, carnival in the Caribbean has long been associated with rebellion against an authoritarian colonial power.<sup>19</sup> However, Johnny (who can be seen as a blind double of perceptive Jonathan) has become a hardened revolutionary and has half turned into an 'embalmed Lenin' (50). So that he dies perpetuating the deadlock, the spirit of impotence and the victim syndrome he has cultivated. He reminds one of the warning in *Black Marsden* that love of freedom can also become a dangerous absolute. As Marsden says, 'Freedom is a baptism in rivers of blood.'<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, Thomas's involuntary crime bears some resemblance to Johnny's indignant resort to violence. As Jonathan explains, 'the transfigurative wound came within an ace of realization' when the wheel of revolution began to turn. But Thomas is moved by the unconscious residues of emotions he has experienced during the day (envy and jealousy), by his one-sided adherence to the woman's cause and his need 'to right old-age wrongs everywhere' (63) so that his gesture is an immature bid for freedom.

An obsessive theme at the centre of Harris's fiction is the nexus of fate and freedom and the difficulty of distinguishing between them because in so many circumstances they look alike and in any case cannot be dissociated.<sup>21</sup> The need to recognize genuine freedom, in the creation of art as much as in life, is also central to *Carnival*. The axe of the true shaman Jonathan perceived at the beginning of the novel moved freely in a 'subtle liquid blow' (22) and made everything alive, while the false shaman was aping his stroke of creation. I referred above to forces of humiliation that looked alike,

yet were different. Such ironies are woven in the metaphorical texture of the narrative, particularly through the many images of fire which clearly consumes yet also leaves an intact core (see the schooner and the staircase in Nightbridge club [160] and 'fertilizes the life of the imagination' (44)). A close reading of the novel and its imagery shows that the impulse towards creation and renewal in Harris's comedy does not rest on a simple duality, a mere juxtaposition of opposites, but on a constant interplay of the two, and on the narrator's growing awareness that each force contains its opposite and can be reversed into it. The two must be kept in sight, the masks must be moveable, as indeed Masters' and Delph's are, for a genuine creation to take place. That is why the images of slicing that run through the novel are so important. It is as if the canvas of existence were cut down again and again with a knife that sometime kills but also initiates the process of self-discovery. The true shaman's axe sets Jonathan travelling through the 'light years' of past, present and future (132), which reminds us of Malraux's saying that 'the time of art does not coincide with the time of the living'; it enables Jonathan to pull apart time and space, not as a mere reproduction of the fragmentations of life, societies of cultures but in an attempt to discover some *inner* reality and to dislodge events/attitudes or images from their fixed and therefore one-sided stance, to make them *move* in much the same way as several women in the novel (the two Alices and Aimée) move in a dance of creation. Dance plays a major role in this narrative as it does in *Ascent to Omai*, in which the dynamic metaphor of the *Dance of the Stone* orchestrates the slices of the protagonist's life.

How this liberating movement occurs is another important aspect of comedy. Both the narrator and his characters are repeatedly faced with the necessity to choose and to exercise freedom, even though complete freedom is impossible. To take one example, when Jonathan recalls his own birth and the fact that his parents had been forced to marry by a conventional society because his mother was pregnant (though they would have done so anyway), he realizes that he was born both from the freedom of his parents' love *and* the fate imposed on his father. Martin Weyl, the father, wonders whether his child will be a mere pawn or a 'child of questioning conscience' (80). Towards the end of his reconstruction, when Jonathan sees clearly that the puppet is equally 'half-living human bread' (164), he suggests that only a personal experience of what reduced humanity suffers (he has then distanced himself from the supreme 'I' and become 'shrunken me' [161-2]) can reveal a distinction between aphehood or puppetry of soul and true self-reflexive ... spark of

fiction' (165). This again recalls a passage in *Ascent to Omai* when a masked character, through his very dispossession, 'enter[s] the innermost secret locks and prisons and chains of . . . mankind' and celebrates 'freedom *through* knowing unfreedom.'<sup>22</sup>

The word *through* is the pivot of Harris's comedies and the crucial link between the 'carnival dualities' (162) he creates. It is the means by which the tragedy of fate, in whatever form, becomes a comedy of freedom although, as *Carnival* shows, the conversion can only be partial and repeated again and again. It is *through* his first violent death that Masters begins to reverse the circumstances of his first life. Martin Weyl is a lawyer and has been chosen to don the mask of Thomas at the reconstruction of his trial for the murder of Johnny. And it is because *he* has been 'a pawn of circumstances' (80) when he was forced to marry that he experiences a 'translation of conscience' and wears the 'embalmed' masks of both Thomas and Johnny to feel their contradictory yet reversible emotions of love and feud. Thanks to Masters' guidance, Jonathan realizes that Thomas's 'dual hands' (his mixture, as I understand it, of doubt and genuine revolutionary hope) can purge the world of violence *through* violence (90). And shortly afterwards we are shown in the suffering of Jonathan's mother that 'the roots of hope lie *through* hopelessness that is sliced, transfigured, sliced and sliced again and again' (96).

As Jonathan meditates on this, he concludes that it is *through* what may seem final and uniformly fateful, particularly in the process of creation, that one can discover a 'sleeping originality' or 'undreamt-of resources of spirit' (110). A variation on this theme was offered earlier when Jonathan recalled his crossing of the Atlantic towards Europe with Masters in 1957, possibly, a reversal of the Middle Passage. A storm broke out during which Jonathan saw through the sides of their ship and had a vision of Christ walking on the waters. The full significance of this passage must be appreciated in its context. What matters for our purpose is that during the episode Masters is blind to what is going on, whereas Jonathan first sees '*through* his [Masters'] eyes into a mystery in which hills tumbled and plates of the sea-bed arose' (91, italics mine). Immediately afterwards he sees the sea and the storm miniaturized in Masters' eyes and 'converted into the terror of beauty' (91). So a transformation of blindness into vision takes place, not in one character but two, as if Jonathan saw through or thanks to Masters' blindness (seeing through blindness may be another example of irony). I think we have here, among other implications, a complex re-working of the myth of Ulysses and the Sirens which Harris had already used in

the storm episode in *Palace of the Peacock* and in *The Waiting Room*. Indeed, shortly afterwards, Jonathan refers to Masters' deaf ears and blind eyes as 'proportions of divine irony' (95). The outcome in this instance is not just the conversion of blindness into vision (after this Jonathan keeps referring to Masters' blind/seeing eyes) but the creation of a *mutuality of vision*.

The reversibility of fate is exemplified in the novel in Jonathan's perception of alternative interpretations of events, in his conception of fiction and the writing process<sup>23</sup>, and in the use of images and metaphors which I now wish to illustrate. We saw that when Thomas kills Johnny, he jumps through the wheel of a donkey cart parked in front of his cave. The wheel radiates a series of possible interpretations in most of Harris's novels. Its basic contradictory yet related meanings are as treadmill or crushing wheel on one hand, wheel of revolution or imagination on the other. After failing to save a matricide Amerindian prince sentenced to death, and also failing to persuade the court that there are 'savage unconscious realms' (141) still in our world, Martin Weyl comes out of court exhausted and full of grief. He is knocked down by a cyclist and crushed by the wheel of a passing dray-cart. At his funeral the horse drawing the hearse takes fright and backs up in the garden, cropping the flowers and leaving it dry. Moreover, Jonathan, then a child of seven, imagines that his father may not be in the coffin and the hearse but rather in the body of the horse (something similar occurs to the narrator in *The Eye of the Scarecrow*). To the adult narrator, the horse responsible for the drought-garden becomes a metaphor for the colonial society, that is, a Trojan horse in whose belly ('Purgatory's belly' [120]) the people watching his father's funeral are also caught. But Jonathan sees that in the "rock-horse" of the colonial regime lies a catalyst of creativity, and this is in a way confirmed when he feels that neither his father's death nor his own in the future make them non-existent in an absolute sense: 'we resided in the womb of a phantom horse as a seed of archaic revolution' (121).

This sentence points to several ramifications. 'Archaic' leads back to the Amerindian prince and the so-called 'savage' element with which every society must come to terms within itself, whereas the phantom horse becomes the womb of all creative possibilities, like the 'glass body' (122) of Masters' mother in which as a child he had discerned his own survival, or even the 'glass-cathedral' to which Masters takes the children Jonathan and Amaryllis at Easter and their meeting becomes the seed of the 'marriage of cultures' which later unites them. In the last part of the novel Jonathan and Amaryllis, still guided by Masters, have a glimpse of Martin at the

top of the ladder of the sky, recognizable through the horse, wheel and cart associated with him. It then becomes clearer that in the case he lost he was advocating the recognition of the hideous imperatives that compelled the Amerindian prince to follow an ancient ritual, imperatives that keep reappearing in various guises, whether as 'black-out Carnival and games of nuclear holocaust' or as 'unconscious advocacy of the body as fodder for the state' (142), which is what the devil demanded of Masters when they met, thus pointing to yet another kind of Inferno. No wonder, Jonathan exclaims, that those who try to enlighten us fall under Christ's Trojan donkey (142). This striking development of the wheel and donkey metaphors sums up Martin's role, whose body has been rent like Christ's (see 141), his heart offered to Masters (i.e. humanity) when his own was failing in order to enable him to survive. Yet even Masters finds it hard to acknowledge that Christ's Trojan or pagan donkey corresponds to 'the human beast of love' (143) which supports the universe (like Johnny carrying the globe on his back).

In the expression 'Christ's Trojan donkey' merge a Christian and a pagan myth, which is the more significant if one keeps in mind, not just its cross-cultural meaning, but the fact that it epitomizes several major aspects of the novel and Jonathan's exploration of 'savage unconscious realms' (141). One is that someone always pays for other people's paradise. Masters as overseer in New Forest used men and women as beasts of burden while in one of his later lives, it is *his* descent into hell which runs parallel with Jonathan's and Amaryllis's marriage in paradise. This is a major way in which Wilson Harris transforms Dante's allegory and, more importantly perhaps, the theological system Dante presents, since none of the episodes describe a self-sufficient or separate state (Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise) but, on the contrary, show that each is sustained by its opposite and that they are inseparable. In this, Harris's 'comedy' differs not just from Dante's but from the contemporary versions which the great poet continues to inspire. It is animated by constant revision and progresses by dismantling, not building up, solid worlds, situations, creeds. It rests on paradox, on what is at once like yet unlike.<sup>24</sup> Comedy, to use Masters' words, is 'reversible fiction' (90). This revisionary process is also embodied in 'Christ's Trojan donkey,' the association of catastrophe and possible resurrection it conveys, the fact that one contains the germ of the other and can be transformed into it.

The last time Jonathan sees his guide, Masters has been resurrected as a Lazarus who unravels a series of existences on a chain of being (143 ff.). Yet he is still pursuing the mysterious overseer who

had borrowed his face in New Forest and was responsible for his first death, the 'character one seeks to confront beyond life and death with the injustices with which one has been saddled in life' (156). Masters never comes face to face with him, though he perceives his outline in the dark when the latter enables him to enter the carnival theatre where he meets a series of understudies who bear the burden of true creation, its heights and depths. It is here that Masters' anger at having once more missed the overseer, his enemy, becomes therapeutic. This conversion reproduces the overseer's own dual function since he both kills and saves Masters, as the muse in *Palace of the Peacock* is said to kill and save at the same time.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of the Paradiso songs in *The Divine Comedy* Dante comes face to face with the light of God, dares to look at it and exclaims:

O plenteous grace, whence I presumed to bear the stress of  
the Eternal Light, till thirst was consummated in the seeing  
there!<sup>26</sup>

So he faces at last the absolute he has longed for. If I understand rightly, God in Wilson Harris's fiction rather seems to hover as a mysterious shadowy presence in the background, as in *Heartland* for example, and, it seems to me, both at the beginning and the end of *Carnival* in the guise of the faceless overseer who has the power to wear other men's masks. That he should be at once mysterious assassin and saviour is probably the supreme irony and the core of Harris's Divine Comedy. Certainly, He is an ambivalent creator and possibly an androgynous one involved in the process described in *The Waiting Room*: 'Ancient metamorphosis, endless creation, gods, species of fiction within whose mask of death one endured the essential phenomenon of crisis and translation'.<sup>27</sup>

For Jonathan in *Carnival* creation has meant throughout a partial unmasking of the contradictory faces of reality. We saw that part of his exploration at least is done in conjunction with Amaryllis, who is not an idealized Beatrice, and their union illustrates both the earthly side of paradise reality and the liberating movement which Wilson Harris equates with creation:

We lived in yet out of frames, we touched each other yet  
were free of possession, we embraced yet were beyond the  
net of greed, we were penetrated yet whole, closer together  
than we had ever been yet invisibly apart. We were ageless  
dream. (123)

All through the last chapter of the novel Jonathan holds Amaryllis in his arms,<sup>28</sup> and the ecstasies, both sensual and spiritual, they experience run in parallel with the torments Masters goes through in the London underworld. When Masters disappears for good, Amaryllis is left with a child in her arms, probably the fruit of Masters' union with his former enemy, Jane Fisher, and, as in several of Harris's later novels, the herald of resurrection. Jonathan is overjoyed at the thought that both pagan and Christian ancestry might merge in the child. But Amaryllis wisely reminds him:

"Whether she is Masters' child or not ... she runs in parallel with all wasted lives to be redeemed in time. And in that spirit she is his child. She is our child. ... *The love that moves the sun and the other stars* moves us now, my dearest husband, my dearest Jonathan, to respond with originality to each other's Carnival seas of innocence and guilt, each other's Carnival lands of subterfuge and truth, and each other's Carnival skies of blindness and vision." (172)

## Notes

- 1 Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock*. Faber and Faber, 1968: 108. Interestingly, the image of the 'hanging eye' recurs in *Carnival* and suggests the eye of God. See *Carnival*. Faber and Faber, 1985: 18 and 25. Further references to Harris's latest novel are given in the text.
- 2 *Heartland*. Faber and Faber, 1964: 68.
- 3 *The Eye of the Scarecrow*. Faber and Faber, 1965: 19.
- 4 *Ibid.*: 18.
- 5 *Ibid.*: 19.
- 6 Cf. his statement 'Each fact is a door to be prised open in order to breach implacable identity or idolatry.' *Explorations*, ed. Hena Maes Jelinek. Dangaroo Press, 1981: 102.
- 7 *Palace of the Peacock*: 85.
- 8 *Tumatumari*. Faber and Faber, 1968: 14 and 16.
- 9 *Ibid.*: 156.
- 10 *Ibid.*: 141.
- 11 *Genesis of the Clowns*. Faber and Faber, 1977: 102, 128, 134.
- 12 See 120.
- 13 *The Tree of the Sun*. Faber and Faber, 1978: 40 and 47.
- 14 *The Angel at the Gate*. Faber and Faber, 1982: 99.
- 15 'Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View of the Revival of Dantesque Scenes in Modern Fiction,' paper read at the University of Turin on 29 October 1985.
- 16 See 'the androgynous miracle of Carnival revolution':65.
- 17 This is clearly a further development of the role of memory when compared to its wholly positive function in earlier fiction, particularly *Tumatumari*.
- 18 This has been the purpose of Harris's fiction from the beginning. On this subject see Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Altering Boundaries: The Art of Translation in *The Angel at the Gate* and *The Twyborn Affair*,' *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1984: 165–174.
- 19 In a first article on this novel I referred to Bakhtine's analysis of the liberating power of carnival. See 'Ambivalent Clio: *In the Heart of the Country* and *Carnival*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XXII, No. 1. I still believe that Bakhtine's writings are relevant to Harris's fiction. Yet, although Bakhtine does stress the ambivalence and the relativizing power of carnival, he tends to see it as exclusively liberating and revolutionary while underestimating its possible hardening into an uncompromising absolute such as Johnny represents. For a Bakhtinian interpretation of *Carnival*, see Russell McDougall, 'Wilson Harris and the Art of Carnival Revolution,' *Commonwealth, Essays and Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Autumn 1987.
- 20 *Black Marsden*. Faber and Faber, 1972: 41.
- 21 The opening sentence of *Genesis of the Clowns* refers to 'an exchange of fates and freedoms.' Faber and Faber, 1977: 81.
- 22 *Ascent to Omai*, Faber and Faber, 1970: 110–111.
- 23 Compare with Harris's statement: 'I believe that the real test of an imaginative writer lies in how one discerns these combinations, catastrophe and regeneration going together because the whole history of civilization makes that inevitable.' Interview by Helen Tiffin, 7 September 1979, *New Literature Review*, No. 7, 29.
- 24 See, for example, Masters' blind yet visionary eyes or the knife which is also a seed (86). See also in *Palace of the Peacock*, the image of the hangman's noose which Harris comments upon in 'Comedy and Modern Allegory.' At the end of the novel the noose supports Donne rather than strangling him, which enables Harris to wittily paraphrase Gertrude Stein: 'a noose is a noose is *not* a noose.'
- 25 *Palace of the Peacock*: 47.
- 26 *The Divine Comedy*, Paradiso, Canto XXXIII. *The Ultimate Vision*. O.U.P., 1951: 586. Translated by Melville B. Anderson.
- 27 *The Waiting Room*. Faber and Faber, 1967: 79.
- 28 See 127, 128, 154, 159, 161, 167, 168.