'Unfinished Genesis'
The Four Banks of the River of Space

Hena Maes-Jelinek

 Mutual. It is all mutual.
Voss

Modern physics ... penetrates in our time into other parts of the world where the cultural tradition has been entirely different from the European civilization. ... [Its] openness may help to some extent to reconcile the older traditions with the new trends of thought. 1

What unheard-of marvels does cosmic gestation prepare in each of us? ... It is now possible to reconstruct the odyssey of the universe, which gives birth to consciousness. ... 2

'I am a king of oceans and skies,' said Proteus to Rose. 'I swam, flew the Atlantic through Middle Passage Africa, India, Greece, Rome, multiple Christian/pagan motherhood of carnival. I reached the margins of the world, I came to El Dorado, all in jest. What a golden jest colonialism and post-colonialism are. What untold riches! He knows as he dreams in his cradle. What a gift for a newborn child. Let us give him the riches of the Imagination for we have nothing. We are poor. Give him a chance, Rose. Let him live to create his Imaginary City of God.' 3

In this plea for the survival of the two-year-old Anselm, Proteus, a Ulyssian figure, reiterates Harris's representation of the child as the carrier of hope for a regenerated imagination. He also clearly presents the deprived post-colonial world as a major locale and source of creativity to counter the crisis of civilization which ruling powers have been unable to solve through 'the long Day of the twentieth century', the time-span through which Anselm, the 'living dreamer' in The Four Banks of the River of Space, retraces his steps in order to conceive a better future. Though from his very first novel Harris has emphasized the need for the 'civilized' world to plumb and attempt to understand, rather than merely exploit, the resources of the 'primitive', his protagonist travels further than ever before into unexplored geographical and psychological landscapes in search of his family's past and of the roots of civilization. The result is an astonishingly orchestrated narrative eliciting unexpected correspondences between pagan myths (Guyanese and Greek) and Christian history and belief, between nature and psyche, a perception, both scientific and imaginative, of the cosmos and the human consciousness, in a language once more abstract and metaphorical of an extraordinary poetic density.

Four Banks is the third part of the trilogy which opens with Carnival and progresses through The Infinite Rehearsal, though in keeping with Harris's rejection of sovereign personality, the characters wear different masks as agents of the protagonist who, himself in different guises (Jonathan Weyl, Robin Redbreast Glass and now Anselm) but with similar preoccupations, unites the three narratives. Each novel 'revises' a masterpiece of Western literature and the specific genre to which it belongs, freeing it from the historical/social/psychological frame and ideology of a given period. Four Banks is a cross-cultural re-writing of The Odyssey which breaks and reverses the finality of Ulysses' deeds, particularly his homecoming at the end. The novel is also full of echoes and self-revising 'rehearsals' from earlier fictions, in particular Palace of the Peacock, Heartland, The Waiting Room, Tumatumari and Ascent to Omui. Like the universe itself, the exploring consciousness in Harris's fiction never stops expanding, as appears from the distance covered by Anselm in comparison with, say, Stevenson in Heartland. While the latter penetrates the interior towards a frontier between life and death, he does not actually cross it except when he disappears at the end of the novel through 'an open winding traverse', along the river 'like an unfinished script which ... had been half-washed away into a message of timeless incompletion ...'. 4 Though Stevenson keeps wondering 'who' and 'what' there is to discover in the heartland depot, he is beset by existential fears that the 'visionary resources' he hopes for are non-existent. Anselm, who also disappears into the rain forest, 5 comes close to these enigmatic resources and is seen entering the kingdom of the dead as he crosses the threshold of the door into the unconscious, while the river of space along which he travels runs from the living to the dead.

To paraphrase Malcolm Bradbury on modernist fiction, the most obvious subject of this novel is the making of that particular work of art

3 Wilson Harris, The Four Banks of the River of Space (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 103. Further references are given in the text.

5 This is a recurring event in Harris's fiction, perhaps inspired by the disappearance of his own step-father into the jungle. As well as a metaphor for lost lives and civilizations, it symbolizes an enigmatic passage from life into death as into another form of being rather than the sharp break between life and non-existence that a witnessed physical death conveys.
process by which a ‘radical change of heart’ (p. 31) stimulated by the imagination can occur. *Four Banks* concentrates more specifically on the role of ‘daemons’ and ‘furies’ in man and nature as inescapable drama-
tis personae in the creative, thus regenerative process. When Canaima, whose victims reflected the moral dilemmas of an age (p. 4) and who nurses in them ‘a conflict of values’ (p. 11), first appears to Anselm, he finds it impossible to escape. In Amerindian mythology Canaima (with a K) is an evil spirit and the god of retaliation, therefore a still highly relevant mythical archetype in a twentieth century convulsed by catastrophic conflicts and expeditions of vengeance, ‘a violent and terrorist age’ (p. 87). Harris’s insistence on the vicious circle of violence and war as the long Day of the twentieth century draws to a close seems to have been prophetic. Yet (or precisely because of what he is) Canaima is now a catalyst and temporary mentor, though a tormenting one, in Anselm’s homeward journey, having himself retraced his steps towards self-knowledge and understood that ‘if a crime is forever a crime, if tauro-
logy rules in our dogmas and poetries and statecraft’ (p. 10), the very instruments of human law and freedom imprison both murderer and victim in their fate. The breaking up of such tautology in order to initiate a process of reformation is a major theme in this novel. Nevertheless, Canaima remains an ambivalent guide as he *dances* his way into 1948 with the freedom of movement of his victim (the Macusi bird-dancer Anselm had seen him kill then, who now becomes a messenger of possible change) and pokes his metaphoric knife in Anselm’s ribs. He gives him the ‘transfigurative wound’ which opens for him the ‘door of the dream-unconscious’ (p. 11) and enables him to meet the ghosts who arise from the past, making him sensitive also to the abuse of others, to the perils that encompass the globe (p. 16).

As Anselm now makes his way, momentarily invisible like an epic hero, on the first bank of the river of space, he first comes across a Macusi axeman felling a tree which turns out to be ‘HUMAN TIMBER’ (p.15), out of whose roots (also the roots of the cross) arises the king of thieves, the well-nicknamed ‘Black Fizarro’, a pork-knocker in whom merge the obsessions with poverty and wealth that have plagued humanity from time immemorial. The sculptor in Anselm chisels him (echoes of *Palace*) ‘as a thief who sought to steal in every century on earth the heaven he had lost on Calvary’s hill’ (p. 17), thus giving form to the mixture of spiritual longing and greed that, through Harris’s fiction, motivates the search for El Dorado. In this novel it is *within* the fabulous ruins of El

---


Dorado that Anselm (namesake of a Canterbury archbishop and saint) creates his Imaginary City of God (p. 13). The king of thieves (also a major but more enigmatic persona in Heartland and The Waiting Room) is another archetype that cannot be eluded, for he too personifies a recurring human attitude. A sinner to the end, he is closer to ordinary human beings than the repentent thief on the cross, and his role here is shared by many other thieves, notably Penelope’s suitors. Through a variety of circumstances and characters who have apparently little in common but among whom what would otherwise be an absolute or implacable kind of behaviour is here fragmented, repetitive patterns of behaviour and history elucidate the functioning of the human mind and psyche overshadowed among whom what would otherwise be an absolute or implacable kind of circumstances and characters who have apparently little in common but desires in widely distant times and spaces. Correspondingly, ‘Home’ is simultaneously the longed for El Dorado, the Imaginary City of God Anselm attempts to conceive of, as we shall see, ancient Ithaca. On a more realistic plane, it is the home that was to be built for refugees of the Second World War when Anselm was sent on an actual expedition to the Potaro river in 1948 to investigate the possibility of creating a settlement there. Though he was unconscious of it then, his meeting with Canaima’s primitive victims and ‘spiritual refugees’ was the seed of metamorphosis in him. Here again merge in the refugees’ lot a quasi universal modern condition, material and spiritual, while ‘Home’ is a physical, mythical and spiritual reality.11

It was in the course of his expedition to the Potaro that Anselm met Ross and Penelope, both obsessed still by her dead husband, who had once come home to find them together in bed, as one version suggests, actually in the garden according to another (p. 26). Since the marriage between Simon and Penelope had ended long before, Ross need not have felt guilty nor responsible for Simon’s death. Yet he kept haunting them after their departure for Guyana as if both Penelope and the land (it had been his ambition to become governor) were his lawful possessions. Anselm’s understanding of the role of the avenging hero in their lives is complemented by his perception of another facet of the Ulyssian figure in his uncle Harold, his ‘proprietorship of Imaginary estates and slave-women within the Rose garden’ (p. 64), since Simon and Harold are partial embodiments of the mythical Ulysses. The revelation Anselm is compelled to look to through Harold’s confessional need, on the second bank of the river of space, is that his uncle, a womanizer married to Alicia, had abused the Rose twins on the estate. Overjoyed when he heard that the second Rose, pregnant by him, would give him his first heir, she had told him that his first son was Anselm, the child of the first Rose twin he had ‘bought’ seven or eight years before. On the third bank of the river of space Anselm must digest the fact that his brother is Canaima.

The kind of associations which allow Anselm to draw a parallel between Simon and Harold as partial Ulyssian figures, while Uncle Proteus plays the role of the homecoming Ulysses in Aunt Alicia’s fossil/garden theatre, is one example among many of the ‘imponderable’ transitions (see the William James epigraph) through which Anselm progresses in his pilgrimage of the mind. A more concrete though still metaphorical thread of associations (yet related to the former as everything is in the dense fabric of Harris’s narrative), grows out of the metamorphoses of nature, a multiple shape-changing reality which substantiates Hubert Reeves’s statement that ‘nature is the family of man’,12 and acts out its endless capacity for renewal or rebirth. One example of this is the ‘HUMAN TIMBER’ felled by the Macusi axeman since the rain forest is the lung of the globe and, as we saw, the king of thieves arises from the tree’s roots. While still on the first bank, Anselm comes to the god-rock of the waterfall, where he meets Inspector Robot and they ascend the rock together. Robot tempts him to look down at the world through his (Robot’s) glasses as into a purely technological laboratory of graves from which no one can escape death. But the very glasses through which Robot fixes the dead into their fate enable Anselm, the sculptor suspicious of all absoluteness and finality, to carve the rocks into a moving procession of ‘living … existential sculptures’ led by the king of thieves, who from ‘[s]culpted wood … became … rock visionary flesh and blood’ (p. 39), and they all ascend the hill where they bury Canaima’s victim, the Macusi dancer.13 Thus the same glasses which for Robot are a tool of power allow Anselm to sculpt ‘live absence’ into ‘presence’, to alter the effects of evil through evil and a felt (re-sensitized) experience of its effects:

I became genuinely involved … in uplifted veil upon veil of darkness until I possessed a glistening apprehension of the magic of creative nature, the life of sculpture, the genesis of art, the being of music. (p. 39)

Such metamorphoses are not merely the expression of Harris’s poetic imagination but of his visionary insight into complex overlapping levels of natural and existential being and into the evolutionary processes which

---

11 Unintentionally, Harris provides an answer to Camus’s question in The Rebel, quoted by Bradbury as an epigraph to The Modern World. Ten Great Writers: ‘Where can I feel at home?’

12 Patience dans l’azur, p. 22, trans. mine.

13 This scene further develops Prudence’s vision in Tumatumari (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 48-49. Anselm, however, is more keenly aware of the possible deceptions of science. Another example of the deadening or creative use to which science and technology can be put is when Anselm realizes the danger of filming the Macusi woodman merely to feed millions of T.V. viewers with images of near-extinction of a tribe, like exotic animals or flowers, ‘to satisfy a mind infused with metaphors of the hunt and the kill, the seizure of others within every museum or cinema’ (p. 14).
underlie the greatly endangered survival of both nature and humanity in
the twentieth century. Rose, for example, is at once Anselm's abused
(though also abusing) mother and mother nature. Anselm's scientific
explanation of the reversal and conservation of the river's resources not only
throws light on the natural phenomena by which rivers, the 'veins and
arteries' of the earth (p. 34) survive to irrigate it, his scientific measure-
ment of the river's increasing energy potential gives him a glimpse of the
creative resources embedded in the area fertilized by the river, namely
the Word and the 'voices of the flute' (p. 44) which arise from the river,
tilting\(^\text{14}\) and translating its banks into a ladder of space while creating a
'curvature of music' (along a geological curve) which of necessity deepens
his perception of the inexhaustible resourcefulness and mutations in
nature and their parallels in a psychological landscape:

That glimpse [he concludes] empowered my pilgrimage upwards in
space yet backwards in time ... [it] became a key into cross-cultural
capacity to bear the dual, triple (sometimes self-reversible) content of
some of the greatest myths of survival in the body of humanity. (p. 47)
In other words, just as earlier in this passage Anselm had described the
interaction between stars and river and sensed the correlation between
a natural phenomenon and the spirit of the place as it found expression
in word and music (on which more below), so now he becomes aware of
a parallel between a phenomenon he observes in nature (the varying
levels and the contents of the river) and the imaginative phenomenon by
which men have given form in myths to their many-layered experience of
development and survival. Harris's approach to nature has always
fused scientifically known facts with an imaginative approach, and in his
criticism he has often stressed the need to match the scientific revolution
by which the relativity and quantum theories completely modified our
perception of the universe at the beginning of this century with a similar
revolution in the humanities that would pull down barriers and palliate the
limitations of our one-track minds. Already in his earlier fiction he
attempted to bridge the post-Renaissance division between science and
art and achieve what scientists have called 'the new alliance' between
science and human creativity.\(^\text{15}\) More recently, he gave the lie to George
Steiner's assertion that

\[\text{[It] is arrogant ... to invoke such basic notions in our present model of the universe as quanta, the indeterminacy principle, the relativity}\]

constant ... if one cannot do so in the language appropriate to them—
that is to say, in mathematical terms.\(^\text{16}\)
One must add, in all fairness, that Steiner has since qualified his state-
ment. True, scientists themselves have pointed to the difficulty of develop-
ning a satisfactory language to describe the insights of quantum me-
chanics for non-specialists. Hubert Reeves explains that man's incapacity
to retrace his steps to the origins of the universe is not due exclusively
to his limited understanding but to the limitations of language which are
also the limitations of logic and the scientific method.\(^\text{17}\) Yet he too
trusts to consciousness to explore a reality which is 'something' rather
than 'nothing'.\(^\text{18}\) Harris, however, largely trusts to intuition to compen-
sate for the shortcomings of man's one-track mind (see the Nick Herbert
epigraph to the novel).

Probably the most revolutionary implications of the discovery of mod-
ern physics, in modern man's understanding of the universe and his
philosophical approach to it, was the replacement of monism by the plu-
ralism inherent in quantum mechanics, a pluralism which even Einstein
could not subscribe to in spite of his contribution to the quantum theory.
I am not suggesting that the relativity and quantum theories had an im-
mediate influence on non-scientists. A similar perception of plurality was
intuited by modernist writers in their exploration of an enlarged subjec-
tive consciousness and the shift their work exemplified from a largely ex-
ternal 'objective reality' to inner plural subjective worlds. But whereas the
breakdown of a unitary world view, of traditional structures and forms in
all fields of experience was a source of deep pessimism and anguish at the
beginning of this century, further aggravated into sheer despair or a phi-
losophy of meaninglessness as the horrors and after-effects of two world
wars piled up, Harris sees in the very dissolution of monolithic world
structures (including, of course, the dissolution of empire) an oppor-
tunity for the renascence of a more 'balanced' civilization. It does not in
any way imply that he condones the violent destruction of a supposedly
decadent civilization. Rather, as with all manifestations of an external
reality which can never be ignored, it is through that very reality, when

\(^\text{14}\) On the disorientation caused by the 'tilting of the field', the perception of nature's
own instability and endless capacity for metamorphosis prior to a necessary psychological
rupture and change, see also Alan Riach's comment in this volume on the protagonist's
similar experience in Black Marsden.

\(^\text{15}\) Ilya Prigogine et Isabelle Stengers, La nouvelle alliance, Métamorphose de la science

\(^\text{16}\) George Steiner, 'The Retreat from the Word', originally published in Language and

\(^\text{17}\) Commenting on this problem and the split which occurred between science and the
humanities, including religion, after the trial of Galileo, Werner Heisenberg, the famous
physicist, concludes: 'whatever the explanation of ... other forms of understanding may
be the language of images, metaphors and similes is probably the only way to approach the
"one" from wider regions. If harmony in a society depends on the common interpretation of
... the unity behind a multitude of phenomena, the language of the poets may be more
important than that of the scientists.' Natural Law and the Structure of Matter (London: The

\(^\text{18}\) Patience dans l'azur, pp. 67-68.
its fragmentation or dissolution occurs (whether man-willed or not) that
a perception of the deeper motivations and emotions that underlie it becomes possible and that, as in the particular case of destructive violence, ‘an essential rapport between ruin and origin’\(^{19}\) can emerge.

Harris’s probing into the process by which ruin (an illusory *tabula rasa*) can actually offer a seed of creation, like his conviction that a truly creative response to crisis ‘may well come from the other side of a centralised or dominant civilisation’\(^{20}\) is concomitant with his ‘quantum’ perception of world and experience. ‘The theory proposes that all the possible alternative quantum worlds are equally real, and exist in parallel with one another.’\(^{21}\) An awareness of parallel and alternative worlds and of their coexistent potentialities\(^{22}\) informs the narrative of *Four Banks* in its major aspects and themes: the evocation of cosmic reality and of perceptible nature; the treatment of myth; Harris’s own well-known rejection of realism and the arousal of overlapping layers of the unconscious into consciousness; all converge and unfold in Anselm’s role as ‘medium’ (medium of discourse, medium of dance) as he gathers within himself ‘plural forms of profound identity.’\(^{23}\) Finally, Harris’s ‘quantum Imagination’ can be said to underpin both his fictional rendering in this novel and his definition of literacy as a perception of a multiplicity of texts, ‘different texts playing against each other’,\(^{24}\) as opposed to illiteracy, which he sees as a psychological and metaphysical phenomenon excluding the presence of the other.

The ‘ruined corridor of space’ (p. 75), a passage into the future, the ‘uplifted Jacob’s ladder in its primitive lightning arc, one curved wing of the law upon the earth, the other breaking into the ceiling of the sky’ (p. 121) and the changing ‘light of the constellations’ (p. 157) evoke the cosmic setting through which the river of space runs, at once a geographical reality (the Potaro river) and a metaphysical one: ‘the river of the dead and the river of the living are one quantum stream possessed of four banks’ (p. 44). This major expression of a plural reality (the world of the living in parallel with the invisible stream of the dead far below) which sustains Anselm’s journey into the past as he glimpses its possible conversion into the seed of a regenerated future, also conveys the creative paradox at the heart of Harris’s writing, the *perception of what is both similar yet different* (‘and’ and ‘yet’ are the most frequent conjunctions in his writing). His re-vision of Gertrude Stein’s ‘a rose is a rose is a rose’ into ‘a rose... is a particle is a wave’\(^{25}\) epitomizes his simultaneously poetic and quantum approach to creativity as ‘meaningful paradox’.\(^{26}\) One of its most significant representations in this novel is Aunt Alicia’s ‘museum of fossils’ (p. 13)—fossils imprisoned in their static historical condition—which is nevertheless a ‘garden’ ‘live fossil’ and ‘re-visionary’ theatre (pp. 15, 18 & 26). This is a paradox which may call to mind the fossil radiation in space. It recalls Aunt Alice’s ‘realm of oblivion or absolute limbo’ which is nevertheless a ‘realm of Carnival evolution into a family of spirit’ in *Carnival*.\(^{27}\) Alicia’s main concern is with the ‘poor in spirit’ whom Anselm is to retrieve from the abyss.

The abyss (cosmic void, geological gorge but also ideological gulf and black holes of forgetfulness) separates parallel and alternative worlds, yet is also ‘creative hollow’ (p. 67), as Anselm realizes when he grasps the distinction between a fast that is ‘the seed of art’ and ‘the pit or hole of bottomless greed’ (p. 67). From his own resistance to the temptation of excessive food and Proteus’s ‘creative fast’ (p. 112) Anselm knows he must also resist identifying absolutely with the starved for this would mean imprisoning oneself into ‘one or other false eternity’ (p. 50), a static condition akin to death, whereas his task as ‘the architect in the City of God is to [animate] a gulf, an abyss, yet a crossing’ (pp. 50 & 52) between parallel lives and experiences without yielding to either in order to approach the mystery of a possible conversion of deprivation (‘abyss of an incalculable, inner reformation’ (p. 40). It is now a commonplace to say that Harris’s art is paradoxically rooted in the so-called historical and cultural void of the Caribbean, summed up here as the ‘creative riddle of the abyss’ (p. 60). Interestingly, the state of the void remains an unexplained mystery in quantum mechanics and it too ‘is one of the states of the physical system which includes all the possible states of the


\(^{22}\) Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, p. 159.


\(^{24}\) ‘Literacy and the Imagination’, p. 27.


\(^{27}\) Carnival, p. 41.
The potentialities of the abyss are revealed through the intangible and ambivalent presence of both daemons and furies and the arousal of music and language. Harris never concealed the tormenting element in the creative process, and, as already suggested, it is indeed Canaima, the daemon and murderer, in whom Anselm nevertheless perceives 'parallel lives, alternative existences' (p. 5), who prods him to creativeness and points to the role of furies in the 'mystery of creativity' (p. 5). Da Silva da Silva had been similarly instructed by the devil and became himself a 'daemon artist' for Julia in *The Tree of the Sun*. Here Anselm kills a flying creature (p. 36) with the knife Canaima had planted in his own ribs and later raises his hand to kill Harold, his father, though the gesture turns into a blessing (p. 80), possibly also a translation of the Oedipus myth. Anselm is thus contaminated by the very evil he condemns. It is significantly in the self-confessional part of the novel on the third bank, when he dialogues with the judge in self-judgement (also a recurring feature in Harris's fiction) within his 'gestating unconscious' (p. 115) that he becomes aware of the 'terrifying energies that imply risk' in creation (p. 112), the daemons and furies that nevertheless 'provide a balance within [those] risks' (p. 113). One should note that it is from the concrete facts in his family's history, 'man-made events' (p. 85) and nature's that Anselm grasps the full measure of the torments of creation: his mother, the first Rose, prepared to sacrifice her son who is saved by Proteus; Aunt Alicia's real motive in adopting Anselm, a complicity with Rose seeking revenge on Harold; Proteus's fast on his drinking bouts, which proves creative, just as Harold's obsession with women reveals to Anselm 'passion's peace [the intensity of peace] at the heart of the storm' (p. 112). The trial—also a gestation of 'innermost form' (p. 117), creation in becoming—ends with the reversal of 'diseased genius' when the furies ignorantly conscripted by diseased antecedents (in their destruction of nature as much as in their conflicting personal relations) are 'balanced ... within ... the gestating male/female body of spirit one nurtures, the body one slays ...' (p. 118). By then he has given new life or 'parented' his antecedents, thus taking a step further the role of the resurrection child in Harris's fiction since he is now the 'parent of civilization', another proof of the mutuality of creation. The above quotation also shows the androgyny of the creative spirit.

Indeed, just as in *Carnival* the translation of vision or 'far viewing' occurs while Jonathan holds Amaryllis in his arms, so here the canvas of Anselm's narrative blends with the tapestry or 'coat of tradition' (pp. 54 & 55) Penelope weaves and unravels. The mutuality of creativeness, together with its dependence on both male and female energy, is asserted when Anselm feels he becomes a 'medium of exchange with "live absences" ' (p. 19) and the substance with which he sculpts Penelope and Ross into life is 'shared thought, a mutual exchange of secrets, a mixture of philosophy and reverence' (p. 20). He draws Penelope 'from the margins of nothingness' (pp. 56 & 57) but she too draws him into the tapestry of her mind. In keeping with the creative role of women in Harris's novels, Anselm emphasizes her participation as feminine creator and man's dependence on her when he tells her that she is 'central to every canvas.' 'You were Wisdom, feminine Wisdom ... You are ... an emancipated centre' (pp. 56 & 57). And even though he repeats half humorously one of Alicia's 'absurdities' he refers to 'God the Mother of all men and women' (p. 65). Penelope's weaving is obviously a metaphor for Harris's conception of reality, for what he called elsewhere 'the fabric of the imagination' and for this narrative in particular, for creation as constant metamorphosis, i.e., the translation of ruin (Anselm travels through ruined premises) and the abyss. In terms of the post-colonial fiction he is writing, the coat is also a metaphor for the arousal of a conquered and lost reality as a new source of art.

Harris's originality as a post-colonial writer lies in his identification of the saving potential of apparently irrelevant resources (the eclipsed 'invisible' conquered) and their creative 'absence' with the very source of language, which is thus also associated with the many forms the 'unfathomable' yet living reality takes in his fiction whether 'the nameless forgotten dead', 'live fossil', 'ground of loss' or the sacred and the divine, as I have attempted to show elsewhere. It is this elusive reality beyond language that Anselm approaches while attempting to move, in Merleau-Ponty's words 'beyond the classical dichotomy between subject and object.' Harris's approach in fiction to the origins of language has always been close, it seems to me, to that of phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and more recently, Emmanuel Levinas. For the former, la parole, provided it is authentic, i.e., the first and original expression of a thought as distinct from ordinary and empirical language, is that thought itself and transforms silence:

Our view of man [he writes] will remain superficial as long as we don't go back to the origin of this transformation, as long as we don't
retrieve the primordial silence under the sound of words, as long as we do not
describe the gesture which breaks that silence. The word is a
gesture and its significance a world. 32

For Harris too ‘the Word is a gesture of psyche’ 33 equivalent to the arousal
of consciousness. It also seems from what precedes that, just as creation
is mutuality, so the Word is a dialogue between the beyond and the here.
And the reality it conveys, its essential liveliness and the many forms it
takes, also partakes of the here and the beyond, as we realize through the
metamorphoses ‘within the tapestry of the Word’ (p. 133) in Four Banks,
particularly in the last part of the novel, for they are ways of fissuring the
visible and reaching the beyond, however evanescent the dialogue may
be. In this process Harris comes close to Lévinas who writes that
the very essence of language consists in undoing its phrase at every
moment through … exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to
say again without ceremony what has already been misheard in the in-
evitable ceremonial in which the said complacently entrenches itself. 34

The last part of the novel is indeed an incoclusive unravelling/travelling
web of word and music as Anselm, Penelope and Ross, led by a
’savage’ guide, travel on the fourth bank towards the ruined mission
house (El Dorado and City of God), each carrying one of the three Macus1
children who used to sing in Penelope’s choir and were drowned in the
river, touched by a ‘dancing’ electric eel. The last episode takes up agai.
and develops the beginning of Part II where both language and music
arise from the abyss, the bottom of the river, or innermost reality:
‘So deep, so far below, is the river of the dead that the sound of its
stream may never be heard or visualized except when we clothe our-
selves with the mask, with the ears of the dancer in the hill. Then
the murmurs of the buried stream comes up to us as if its source lies in
the stars and it may only be heard when we are abnormally attentive
to the mystery of creation and the voice of the flute within the lips of
three drowned children.’ (p. 44)

The child, as ever a potential agent of transformation, is here the Word
made flesh and, reciprocally, flesh into Word, for the ‘bruised Word or
child’ is a ‘window through bandaged eyes into space’ (p. 126) and so
helps Anselm to vision. The children have been pulled up from the river
of space and are, for all their frailty, the personal burden that each charac-
ter must come to terms with: Anselm’s twinning with the daemon-killer

32 Phenomenologie de la perception, p. 214. This formulation of the arousals of language
from silence is very close to Harris’s in The Eye of the Scarecrow (London: Faber and Faber,
1965), p. 95.

33 See Enigma of Values, ed. by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Aarhus:

34 Emmanuel Levinas, Totalité et Infini (1971; rpt. Paris: Librairie Générale Française,

Canaima (brother yet stranger within oneself), and Simon’s obsession
with vengeance which drove him to become the hero Penelope married,
hiding within and from herself a ‘spectre’ of conquest from which she is
now freed (p. 160). She too had a share of responsibility in obsessions
with vengeance and conquest, and it is mainly through her emancipation
that we perceive the link between the ‘conversion’ of Ulysses and the
retrieval of the children from the depths of space and unconscious.

From his early poetry Harris’s work evinces his deep interest in Ulysses
and the implicit parallel he draws between Troy and vanished pre-Colum-
bian civilizations. His fragmented identity in Four Banks breaks the absolu-
teness of the homeric archetype, transforms the classical epic and even
elicits a parallel between a humbled Ulysses hero and Christ’s sacrifice,
a further development of the association between Christian and pagan
myth in the metaphor of ‘Christ’s Trojan donkey’ in Carnival. In Anselm’s
Imaginary Theatre ‘the imperial design of the homing lord and mas-
ter [is] converted into a post-colonial fable’ (p. 63) and Ulysses/Proteus
in rags dies, killed by the thorn Rose has sent to his brow, joining in
death the ‘poor in spirit’ and gaining the strength to descend into the
world’s abyss (p. 66), which has only been possible through an accept-
ce of fragmentation: ‘we may only heal the wounded archetype when
we live the divide at the heart of the language and place its enormity on
many shoulders, when several players … take a share in performances
and portrayals of … inner immensity of craft, inner power’ (p. 63).

Living the divide at the bottom of the heart language (‘an abyss, yet a crossing’
[p. 50]) is what Anselm has done in his pilgrimage, realizing as Julia does
in The Tree of the Sun that ‘in that hiatus was grace to make the unbear-
able bearable.’ 35 The hiatus is also the seat of ‘the medium of discourse’
Anselm enters reluctantly at first. In Harris’s very idiosyncratic use of
‘discourse’ merge different forms of natural and artistic expression. While
the concept of contemporary post-structuralist discourse is generally cut
off from essence, a self-sufficient human construct and/or an instrument
of power, discourse here is not only dialogue with the dead, the lost and
the sacred (see above), a paradoxical conjunction of ‘absence’ and ‘pres-
ence’, it is dance, music, and the voice of nature that speaks through bird,
leaf or waterfall. In The Far Journey of Oudin: ‘A tree was a word, a river
was a word, a man was a word: yet they were—all three—as imperish-
able and wordless as all substance.’ 36 In The Tree of the Sun Julia reflects
that ‘the sense of wood possessed its grain of incalculable irony or hu-
mour, incalculable spark of compassion.’ 37 This prefigures the ‘HUMAN

35 The Tree of the Sun, p. 85.


37 The Tree of the Sun, p. 79.
TIMBER' out of which the king of thieves materializes. The diversity of discursive forms is rooted in what Harris calls an *inner* objectivity, in essence and perhaps in what he terms 'the universal unconscious' but also corresponds to a religious source of life, increasingly presented as such in his fiction. That source lies in the eclipsed ancestral tongues from which both Word and music arise as Anselm comes upon the second bank. More than words, however, the 'living language' is 'miracle of being' captured in the light voices of the flute or the 're-visionary step' (p. 10) of the dance. Because they are essentially fluid, kinetic and 'uncapturable', music and dance are the most congenial expressions of Harris's transformative view of existence. At once a gateway, 'melodic door' (p. 8), into unexplored being and a conversion into life of the spark of creation, they partake of its two-way process. Music animates all forms ('rhythmic stones' [p. 125]) and is with dance 'the thread linking all creatures, all spheres, all places'; it is, as Anselm puts it, 'antiphonal discourse' (pp. 27-28). When he retraces his steps more deeply towards the origins of discourse ('We have a long way to go backwards into all these names ... with which we have tagged genesis' [p. 133]), he perceives the 'musicality or linkage' (p. 122) between the daemon and fury of creation. Which brings to mind Hubert Reeves's description of the 'sounds' of music first as the *proof of the reality of the curvature of the music that rose upon the ladder of space*', then as the structures in the universe. As he attempts to define the 'music of nature', Reeves wonders whether the development of the universe in space and time was already inscribed in the interactions between particles: 'Were the flight of the nightingale in front of my window or the last sonatas of Beethoven already inscribed in the partition which quarks, electrons and photons were preparing to read fifteen billion years ago?'

In the crucial passage in which Anselm describes the birth of music out of the sieved fossilized vestiges of the (Potaro) river of space, he finds 'proof of the reality of the curvature of the music that rose upon the ladder of space' (p. 45) in his surveying work in the region in the 1940s. 'The curvature of the music' is energized into a spatial curve (see diagram, p. 46), the path Anselm follows to retrieve a similar energizing content from 'the greatest myths of survival in the body of humanity' (p. 47). The "curvature of space", writes Levinas, 'expresses the relationship between human beings ... [it] is perhaps the very presence of God.' This might serve as a summing up of the reality Anselm reaches with Penelope and Ross after their 'capture' by the primitive tribe, when at last they hear the 'drums of Home' (p. 161) and are caught up in the music's embrace. Ross's conversion has taken place just before this and may be the most significant of all because he deeply distrusted the Macusi Indians he had come to teach and was suspicious of their 'savage idealism' and wish to conquer (p. 138). In his conversion, however, coalesce several kinds of discourse. While early in the pilgrimage, he and Penelope were so 'seized' by the supremacy of their language (English) and unaware of the native rhythms and antiphonal quality it had acquired in Guyana that they were prepared to accept the divide at the heart of the language, the divide between 'object' and 'subject' (p. 29), as Ross carries 'the suffering Word and primitive child' in his arms, '[t]he Word changed. Its inherited glory dimmed' (p. 127).

The second change occurs when he comes upon the 'Dido Orchid' he longed to find, a rare specimen named by a German botanist, now both flower and 'woman's shape' (p. 135), whose deprivation and self-immolation by fire as queen of Carthage abandoned by Aeneas has transformed into 'blackened fossil flesh' (p. 140). As with the Rose-garden, the Dido Orchid expresses a remarkable poetic identification between woman and nature and another translation of myth. At this stage, however, only Anselm perceives in the orchid the fossil's possible resurrection into life, and it is only at the very end, when he realizes that the child he has been carrying is a girl, one of the finest voices at the mission and a dancer, that Ross is on the verge of surrendering to 'the miracle of hope ... [that] might still breach an epic formula' (p. 161). His conversion is not final but the change in the Word and the reality it represents, the possible breach in epic formula and its tragic consequences, initiate a new cycle of life.

Like the ending of *Palace of the Peacock* and, it seems to me, for the first time since that novel, the *end of Four Banks* presents the Amerindian captors (now possibly guardians) and their captives together in 'a theatre of interchangeable masks and fates and elements upon savages and civilizations' (p. 161). Anselm's rehearsal is temporarily over; 'the burden and mystery of the rising sun' seems to be suspended on the 'unfinished genesis' (p. 9) of his/Harris's art.

---

38 See Russell McDougall's comment in this volume that 'sound becomes the means of breaking partial orders of reality which masquerade as absolute.' A full-length essay, like his on *Palace of the Peacock*, would be necessary to construe the role of music in *Four Banks*.


40 *Totalité et Infini*, p. 324.

41 This view of creation recurs in both fiction and criticism and naturally follows from Harris's concept of 'infinite rehearsal'. 