

Transfigurative Art: Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar*

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Only he was created who gave issue to creation ...

Perception lived on ... and it sought the counter-perception ... in the invisible depths of the other ...

Visible yet invisible was this occurrence of the skies, visible yet not recognizable—he, however, he the beholder, caught in this universal growth, he the plant-involved, the beast-involved, he also stretched himself from firmament to firmament ... through the starry tides of the universe, and standing in the earthly real with his animal-roots, his animal-stems, his animal-leaves, he stood at the same time in the furthermore sphere of the stars ...

Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*¹

Each new novel by Wilson Harris arouses expectations among readers who have followed the development of his fiction since the initial groundbreaking novel *Palace of the Peacock*. Though his original theme, his vision of the world, and of the human person have remained basically the same, his in-depth explorations of them have brought to light so many existential dimensions, generated so many variations and multiple levels of meaning that one wonders what new fictional creation he will come up with. *The Mask of the Beggar*² which, Harris says, is definitely his last novel appears as an open-ended climax of a necessarily unfinished opus, given his conception of fiction. Like *The Dark Jester*, it can be seen as 'A Fragment of a Dream',³ though yet a step further in its self-reflexive pursuit of a multi-dimensional art. It is also a philosophical journey towards the roots of consciousness.

The nature of art and of the creative process, Harris's in particular, and the need to understand their origins and function are the central themes of *The Mask of the Beggar*. They continuously break through a factual, one-sided perception of the world and its alleged universality. Hence the historical and political dimensions of the narrative in which the ruling world order and present-day civilization are repeatedly challenged by hidden imaginative resources. In a prefatory note Harris himself outlines

the essential features of this venture towards 'inexpressible truth' (105) or the spiritual dimension that he sees as a necessary counterpoint to materialism.

Earlier novels by Harris, notably *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and *The Dark Jester* (2001), present characters who emerge from the other side of life, from the unconscious or, put differently, from the subterranean dimension and storehouse of the past Harris has explored through his fiction in keeping with his concept of existence as a life-and-death process. In *The Mask of the Beggar* the narrator of the first four chapters is a nameless mother who recalls an experience of her equally nameless son at the age of eight, when the boy came home at lunch time so upset by the face of a Beggar he had seen at the corner of West Street that he refused to eat.⁴ The meeting with the Beggar occurred in 1933 but the mother, who died in 1952, returns from the dead and evokes the event in the year 2000 in a dialogue with her son, an artist, sculptor, painter, writer.⁵ From the beginning then, there are backward and forward shifts in time, juxtaposed with timelessness. This rejection of linearity is a major feature of Harris's cross-cultural fiction generally, for by bringing together different cultures from different periods, non-linearity contributes to the revelation of elements rooted in one composite source.

The characters too are multi-dimensional, at once real human beings, sculptures, and paintings he creates and, as we gradually realize, figures moving in the artist's consciousness. The mother, in particular, is a 'speaking sculpture' who dialogues with her son in the artist's studio. She is also the 'Mother of Space' on the map of art for, as she says, 'I had created him to be my creator' (42). 'Mother of Space' is clearly a further development of the 'womb of space' which, in earlier novels, is the seat of all human experience and existence transfigured into 'their own shadowy essence'⁶ and the source of Harris's art. She is thus without and within the artist, and counterbalances his own reflections and questionings. They are also, though not always, 'adversarial' (56). But 'I knew', she says, 'such adversarial happenings ... represented ... a step forward in the ambivalent relationships of creator and created' (57). This is reminiscent of Harris's emphasis on 'adversarial contexts'⁷ and, in his earlier writings, on the reconciliation of opposites, here a 'blend of opposites' (94) 'that brings us closer to the inexpressible truth' (105). In *The Four Banks of the River of Space* Anselm reflects that, more than a reconciliation, there is 'a gathering up of all that had been experienced in every condition of existence ...'⁸ I think that this gathering up in the

womb of space of all that has been experienced is what Harris means by 'counter-intuitive resources' (ix) in an art that is 'intuitive and Counter-intuitive' (78) or, put differently, an art that arises from a dialogue with the unconscious. An important discovery made by the artist is that he cannot 'direct' the dialogue which he records in his voluminous notebooks, cannot impose his own will on those with whom he dialogues as when later in the narrative he wants to make his mother/sculpture speak and she remains stubbornly silent. He then realizes that '[i]t had always been a spontaneous eruption within me and within her when I addressed her' (89). This illustrates a major aspect of Harris's conception of the 'intuitiveness and counter-intuitiveness' of fiction as well as his repeated emphasis in his self-reflexive comments on the independence of characters in spite of a 'community' and a sharing of Imagination (82).

The figure of the Beggar is inspired by Ulysses's disguise as he returns home from the Trojan war in Homer's *Odyssey*. The artist hopes for the homecoming of his father who disappeared in 'an ocean of forest' (2)⁹ at the back of Harbourn town, an imaginary location on the South American coast in what is obviously Guyana. Like the mother, the father is also, at one level, a mythical and archetypal being, the unknowable Father of humanity (42). The Beggar too seems to have returned from the dead with his 'loathsome face ... as though arisen from the womb of a grave' (20).¹⁰ But unlike Ulysses, he is not animated by a spirit of vengeance.¹¹ On the contrary, he is the medium through which the past victims of history are resurrected in the artist's consciousness. His is not a hard, impenetrable, or insensitive mask. A composite of all races, his skin is 'split into tiny holes' (2) and 'crevices' (4) through which, as through the Mother's 'holed eyes' (14), the victims of history come back to life. It seems that the shock the boy received when he saw the Beggar was the 'first visionary experience' (2) leading to the kind of artist he was to become. He had pushed away his plate but 'each grain darkened itself into the shadowy brush of a painter ... The Beggar's skin was split into ... sliced rice' (2). In other words, the grains of rice become grains in the canvas of art. Later he thinks that 'slicing was a form of art' (122). As in most of Harris's fiction, especially the later novels, fissures, splits, holes, and gaps are recurring images parallel to chasms in the landscape or the abysses of history. They are one kind of 'quantum variations' of the necessary disruptions of surface reality on the path to creation.¹² Drowned immigrants 'reside ... in the Beggar's spiritual disguise and mask' and so alight in the artist's paintings

and sculptures, while the Mother, herself risen from a chasm, speaks of the need to cross chasms 'to find the origins of life' (11). The Mother and the beggar are complementary. As a 'figure of Space' she provides 'a vacancy behind or within the Beggar's Mask' (20) and the artist calls her 'the bride and the mother of the Beggar' (18).

The immigrants – forgotten, invisible victims of the past, who in all Harris's novels resurrect from the womb of space – are here mainly Chinese workers brought to Guyana in the middle of the nineteenth century to replace the emancipated slaves who would no longer work on the plantations. One of the ships bringing them took fire and the drowned immigrants arise from the sea through the Beggar's Mask as Ghost arises from the sea in *The Infinite Rehearsal*. The fearful voices of the Chinese who, in official history, are merely 'a frail tissue of statistics' (12) are heard in the artist's studio and make the Mother wonder whether this is her own voice in the street, one of many suggestions that the womb of space is the subterranean territory of the eclipsed or dead other(s). The Mother sees herself as 'a woman of speaking glass or eloquent paper or wood in his [the artist's] imagination' (2), 'eloquent wood resembling flesh' (5). Similarly, the immigrants' voices, 'the voice of fleshly wood' (12), seem to come alive in the street. This recalls the 'HUMAN TIMBER' felled by the Macusi axeman in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*.¹³ If I understand rightly, 'fleshly wood' is an oxymoron epitomizing Harris's conception of art, its materials (wood, glass or paper) as real in the artist's imagination (see also 107) as flesh-and-blood creatures since fiction itself is 'a text of being'.¹⁴ It also expresses the underlying diversified unity of all existence, a 'cross-culturality between living nature and humanity', which the Mother presents as 'the timeless instrument of art' (50). Flesh and wood are even presented as interchangeable, 'Ancient wood sensitized into the flesh of art' (22).¹⁵

As indirectly suggested above, the novel takes place entirely within the artist's consciousness or, more exactly, at the edge of the unconscious which the artist probes and from which the figures he sculpts and paints arise in a reciprocal movement. But this is only one kind of 'mutuality' (vii). The deeper kind functions, so to speak, at the more profound level of the unconscious where historical and mythical figures as well as cultural entities, metaphorically represented, move in 'quantum variations', Harris's terminology already used in his earlier work. To put it simply, one might first quote part of the epigraph to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*: 'Quantum reality consists of simultaneous possibilities', a 'polyhistoric kind of being ... incompatible with our ...

one-track minds'.¹⁶ Or, put differently, 'physical reality divides into a multiplicity of separate universes... Reality is a multiverse rather than a simple universe'.¹⁷ As is well known, Wilson Harris has always tried to reconcile science and art. I am hoping to show that 'Quantum variations' inform the basic structure of the novel as well as all its aspects and the 'partial' realities the artist envisions, which are all part of an 'unfathomable wholeness'¹⁸ or, as he says in this novel in a multiplicity of expressions, 'unknowable God' (26), 'unfathomable Creator' (119) or 'unfathomable Spirit' (142). Indeed a remarkable feature in the narrative is the blending of Harris's philosophical belief in 'a true Creator whose unknowable limits are our creaturely infinity'¹⁹ with the scientific perception of multifarious and protean manifestations of life and art.

This blending of art and science takes place through the work of the artist, the medium who resurrects the drowned of history from the vacancy behind the Beggar's Mask. When he was a boy, the mother described his father as perfect, and he became the ancestor humanity lost for ever 'except within an organ of true creation that ceaselessly returns' (18). The lost Father thus comes home in different guises in the artist's work. He is in one sense the unknowable God for whom the artist is a substitute (34) in his creative capacity. He also materializes in several partial father figures, one of them Trotsky, the father of revolution, who believed '*in a permanent unceasing revolution*' (43) but was assassinated like 'pre-Columbian figures symbolically assassinated by history in conquistadorial regimes' (44) several hundred years before.

The parallel between Trotsky's assassination and the suppression by conquest of pre-Columbian cultures is first perceived when the mask of the beggar crumbles into ancient fragments, one of which represents a 'SEATED PRE-COLUMBIAN SAGE WITH A CUP' (40) with '*Wings in his emaciated chest*' (41), who looks like an Oriental Sage and might be instrumental in the creation of a new world view that would revive shadowy populations.²⁰ Lazarus, a recurring figure in Harris's fiction, was a contemporary of the pre-Columbian artist who fashioned the Oriental Sage (83). He is another Father personification who resurrects as a work of art. In the narrative told by the artist at Carnival time, he is a dancer now 'Lazarus Quetzalcoatl' (84). Quetzalcoatl is an ambivalent god who plays a major role in the artist's search for new beginnings. A 'miraculous synthesis of serpent and bird',²¹ he is creator of the world and in the pre-Columbian Postclassic period usually appears in human form. He is also god of the wind (Spirit) and of the dawn. With his adversary Tezcatlipoca ('Smoking Mirror')²² they are said

to represent matter and spirit. In his meditation the artist remembers that '*he [Quetzalcoatl] looked into the Smoking Mirror and saw he had a human face*' (118).²³ He took on himself the sins of man, 'the sins of a failed, universal imagination' (120). But 'he clung ... to an unfathomable Creator in whom a Spiritual art, beyond fixtures, mirrors the promise of Man however desolate that promise may seem' (119). We shall see that, later in the artist's dreaming journey, Quetzalcoatl's rebirth is a presage of new beginnings. The point here is the relationship or cross-cultural community of being between figures and works of art retrieved from the straitjacket of time.

Another major instance of quantum variations is the many approaches to and definitions of art, though all concur with Harris's fundamental conception of art as emerging from the void glimpsed through abysses and wounds in human beings and in the earth itself, which is why art is never free of terror and violence. We see this on the face of a Child represented on a pre-Classic, pre-Columbian bowl, a 'Face ... filled with terror', which makes the Mother realize that the Void '*live[s]*' (73). She is herself part of the Void, of the abyss in which, Harris thinks, art is rooted. It confirms her own relation to the Void and to the creation of art as was expressed earlier:

Is the Mother of Space the mother of a Void that reaches into alternative universes of creation and 'de-creation', of Something that dwindles into Nothing we cannot yet explain save that this is the spirit of dialogue in art? (42)

At first sight, it might be argued that art is approached and defined in Harris as a remedy for the world's evils and illnesses. But a more careful consideration of his writing shows that art as such is no redeemer. It is only instrumental in breaking through '*all closures and tyrannies of convention*' (64) and so opening the way to the awakening of consciousness. All through the narrative the artist is engaged in making his self-portrait, attempting all the while to liberate himself from all prejudices, repeatedly faced with opposite or alternative choices in his self-questioning journey. For instance,

Was art one-sided, dominant, singular, on the Bridge of Creation? Or was it plural, plural artist and creations overshadowed by an unfathomable God that gave all gods and substitutes chances for a complex, open-ended medium of universality ... ? (54)

In Harris's fiction and essays one manifestation of art and of the substance of art has always been an eruption of the unconscious into the conscious or, as he once said, 'the capacity of the abyss [eclipsed reality]

to secrete re-visionary potential within texts and imageries'.²⁴ The Unconscious is therefore the seat of the roots of consciousness. In this novel what one might call *full* consciousness is a translation of wholeness and therefore 'a mystery' (117) coexistent with the unconscious ('unconscious/conscious' 166). As the Mother of Space reflects, 'Consciousness – however diverse in its formal applications – was a universal, spatial entity, a small-seeming entity perhaps yet boundless, unbound' (35). In his own journey towards this boundless entity, while the artist fashions himself, his purpose is to '[release] the prisoners of closures of tradition and fate' (64).

This takes place gradually, though not completely, in the second part of the novel narrated by the artist. It is carnival time²⁵ and he leaves his studio to go to Water Street, looking for the woman of whom his 'Mother of Space' is an exact reproduction, which may be why he cannot find her.²⁶ He also looks for Lazarus in whom he finds an original resemblance with the Oriental Sage and the pre-Classic Child on a pre-Columbian bowl as these arise in his consciousness. He himself dances carnival as a Stone, which turns 'into a flowing life-giving stream' (85), and later crashes into his studio (152). Nevertheless at this stage the artist realizes that he is halted in his journey and cannot force open the door to a deeper consciousness.

Meanwhile, in his dream, bits of his studio walls – the seat of creation – turn into keys, one of which gives him a clue that will open the way towards self-understanding. He finds an old letter which reminds him that he had sold his childhood house to a woman he now visualizes simultaneously as real flesh-and-blood in his studio, a figure in his painting, and a variation on the Mother of Space (97). She too has returned out of the past into the present 'to stab at all complacency' (95). She makes him aware of the likeness between his sculpture of the Mother of Space, the figure of a '*reclining woman, 600 BC, Ancient Mexico*' (95), and a woman who, she says, is in prison. After her visit, the artist becomes aware of all the prisoners he should rescue from gaol: the reclining woman, Lazarus, the Oriental Sage, a Child-like Man, and the Beggar, all figures and elements of the past he had seen before without fully exploring their hidden cross-cultural possibilities susceptible to sustain him on the path to consciousness. The Beggar persuades him to visit his former home which, the artist says, 'was to prove my first self-portrait' (101), at first an 'unwelcome' one.

Indeed, when he arrives at his former home, which he hadn't seen since he sold it, paying no attention to what he then deemed

unimportant details, he is shocked to see that it has been replaced by a prison into which he is introduced by a modern Cyclopean gaoler (108). His subsequent encounters with the prisoners are clearly metaphorical landmarks in the creation of his self-portrait, that is of a new regenerated self, and of art. 'Was my self-portrait the prison, the mental prison in which she [the reclining woman] was confined?' (104). Significantly, the figures of the past are also contemporary, suggesting that they remain imprisoned by 'static traditions ... in dominant cultures' (106) of which the Cyclopean gaoler, blind to deeper realities, is a guardian. So the reclining woman is also a present-day drug addict far gone in her pregnancy. But her eyes are 'at the edge of the inexpressible' (105). And contrary to the artist's assertion that he has come to rescue her, she says *she* will rescue *him*, thus emphasizing the role of the Other in spiritual salvation, necessarily a reciprocal process.

The artist's ensuing progress is largely conveyed in poetic terms that weave the existential and spiritual interconnectedness between all beings and natural elements. An association of images, namely the balloon-like pregnancy of the pre-Columbian reclining woman, the Oriental Sage with a cup, and the Child on a bowl, '[speaking] to one another' and belonging themselves to the 'womb figured in the stars' (109), enable him to move as a seed from one world to another and to join in their constellation (110). Back in prison as a Nobody in the eyes of the Cyclopean guard,²⁷ the artist comes upon Lazarus, now *Faceless*, who tells him he will arise with the new coming of Quetzalcoatl: 'I arise time and time again, to make the different universes on Earth live afresh' (112). Of course, he clearly stands for the many resurrections of the past, frequent in Harris's fiction. The artist's vision here blends together Homeric, Christian, and pre-Columbian elements. Lazarus manages to escape from prison but in a way resurrects in the Child Quetzalcoatl to whom the drugged woman gives birth before dying. With her death, something in the artist dies, 'giving birth to Imaginations more varied than [he] dreamt [he] was capable of' (121), which may have been what she meant when she said she would rescue him.

In his continued meditation in the prison cell, also the prison of a civilization (118), the artist recalls a painting by Gauguin of a woman lying passive, watched by the spirit of the dead. He also recalls the picture in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, which alone bears the marks of the protagonist's debaucheries, and he sees in the painting 'the intuitive life of art' (117). He then contrasts the Spirit of Life and the Spirit of the Dead with the 'cell of language' in which '[w]e imprison ourselves

without understanding how or why we are imprisoned' (117). Language is indeed a major, if not *the* major, factor in the construction of reality. The Mother of Space complains at one stage that

The comedy of the Inferno ... had imposed itself upon outsiders ... wittingly, at times, unwittingly, at other times, by closures, a repetition of closures in language and in ideas adopted by politics, economics, and science, exercised therefore by a dominant civilization which sees itself as an absolute in its values of communication. (64)

But there are also 'lapses' in the language through which man can become conscious of forgotten relationships between visibility and invisibility (53). And the artist later realizes that '[n]othing was settled without a visionary language to re-interpret the ruined fixities of recorded history that baffled gaolers and prisoners alike and kept them divided and in place' (85).

This visionary language comes to him when he perceives the deeper significance of Quetzalcoatl in his work:

the terrain of imagination into which I had now distinctly entered in meaningful, far-reaching deceptions of place that lifted me into walled otherness and into peculiar, changing sameness as though I were both in my studio and in a prison that had been my home, as though I were living consciousness and yet even more alive, it seemed, in a depth of original unconsciousness flowing into fragmentary, modern consciousness in sculptures and paintings ... I had woven which were returning ... the terrain of lost or stolen voices ... (124)

From then on, figures buried in the unconscious help him prepare for the 'Journey of Dream on which a civilization must embark to save itself' (130): the reclining woman; Quetzalcoatl as her Child, who 'knows without knowing' the 'Itness of the Mind'²⁸ but also the ambivalent fire 'burning and not burning' (128)²⁹ which falls like a veil around him in his Dream and equips him for the journey 'within [him] and beyond [him]' (128).

In the Journey of Dream on which he now embarks the artist meets several historical figures who, in one way or another, have contributed to the nature of civilization. Cortez, for instance, in his conquest of Mexico set a pattern of violent behaviour replicated in Stalin, 'set[ting] in a train a series of trails that led to the murder of Trotsky' (140). It is obviously Harris's conviction that the failure to create a 'New, Cross-Cultural World in the sixteenth century' (143) encouraged similar failures due to one-sided 'ritual and dogma' (136) in colonial encounters in the following centuries. In his dream³⁰ the artist has now reached a level of depth in which the 'stilled' portraits of the figures he meets are

aroused, and he 'participate[s] in them as they in [him]' (131),³¹ which, apart from the cross-culturality it illustrates, implies, I think, that the artist's delineation of his self-portrait is simultaneously a potential creation of a new society and civilization. It is also at this level that the artist discerns the possibility of remorse in Cortez. Already in earlier novels the dreaming protagonist becomes aware of a vulnerability in the most ruthless conquerors or tyrants, whether Cortez, Pizarro or Jim Jones.³² This is an ontological feature manifest in all forms of being, whether human or in nature, a variation on the holes, gaps and chasms already mentioned and a chink in anyone's armour which could open the way to change. Hence the expression 'transfigurative wound'³³ and in this novel 'a human transfigurative art' (140). It is a variation on the regenerative dimension of catastrophe in Harris's art. The artist, however, cannot free Cortez within himself 'from his prejudices and from [his own]':

I could not wholly cast off the ancient, unconscious/subconscious desire to master the globe that *persisted as the real savagery in all times from Alexander the Great through Napoleon to Hitler and Mussolini.* (146)

As in his meditation as a whole, the artist envisages alternative possibilities and choices, and at this crucial moment of his self-questioning does not dissociate 'the savagery one carries in oneself alongside sensations of confusing possibilities of revelation' (148). He nevertheless feels prompted to express his '*confession*' (148-150), an artist's manifesto, obviously Harris's as much as his protagonist's.

Indeed, the confession is a summing-up of the conception of art which, from his first novel onwards, structures Harris's fictional sequence: the paramount role of intuition in the creation of a 'community of being' as reciprocal process and the capacity for change it could entail if applied in society. This conviction that art could generate social change is partly sustained by an originality which Harris sees as parallel to discoveries in science, not just the quantum variations linked metaphorically in the narrative but the arousal and movements of '*an ancient and flexible substance*' buried in the psyche, and comparable to '*the moving plates under the surface of the Earth*' (150). The notion of 'moving plates' derives from a theory already formulated in the 1920s but only fully accepted by scientists at the end of the 1960s. It assumes that the continents used to form one single great entity which subsequently broke up, the resulting territories drifting apart. An oceanic rift or mountain belt at the bottom of the ocean is subject to

constant submarine volcanic eruptions that entail the formation of a new oceanic crust and the continuous displacement of the continents. Because the oceanic and continental crusts, now called 'plates', are moving constantly, they are called 'moving plates'.³⁴ Significantly, Harris who had already drawn a parallel between psychological and geological depths in *Ascent to Omai*,³⁵ suggests again that the past apparently imprisoned in the unconscious is not static but continuously susceptible to movements and eruptions like the 'moving plates'. The other major element in the artist's confession is the emphasis on '*the life of Spirit*' (148) already present in *Palace of the Peacock* and a prominent trend in the later fiction. Its new development in this novel is the parallel between Christ and Quetzalcoatl. It was believed in ancient Mexico, that Quetzalcoatl would return in the future like Christ. And, just as Christ represents suffering mankind, so Quetzalcoatl returns '*in hidden intuitive form ... on the Ships that brought Immigrants [exploited victims] from China into Harbourtown and South and Central America*' (149). This is yet another instance of the cross-cultural, a way of bridging the gaps between men and cultures and of bringing '*hidden twinships*' to light (148).

The last section of the narrative develops, as in earlier stages, along dualistic lines. There is a 'CRASH' (151) in the artist's studio, which in all Harris's novels is a metaphor for the shattering of the world of appearances, thus enabling a deeper reality to come to light.³⁶ The crash occurred when a small man threw into the studio a large rock, 'a radioactive Stone' with a map of the world on it (as on the floor of the studio), provoking what the artist calls a 'numinous explosion', a 'blow from the Sky' (152), while the small-sized man who threw the Stone may himself have descended from the Sky or ascended from the street (153). Dressed in a beautiful suit made in one of the world's big capitals and apparently representing their materialism, he too exists in several dimensions. He is a real man created by the artist in his studio, sentenced for stealing a boat (156) and later arrested by the police after escaping from prison (169). He is also 'buried history' and a quantum variation of all the figures the artist has met in his explorations. He (the artist) has now reached the roots of consciousness to which such variations are native (159), while the Child-like Man also appears as 'the living embodiment of burning, non-burning fires that had lit [the] studio from the beginning' (153): 'Fire burns yet possesses a secret window [another variation on 'hole'], in the furnace of violence it creates, through which we contemplate an immense task in varieties of healing' (157).

This last creation, however, can also be threatening and a source of terror for the artist, an indication that the Other whom the artist thinks he has made is not a passive substance to be moulded to his liking but, like the Mother of Space, an independent character. At the deepest level of his dream, the artist sees him as 'sliced', broken and dismembered but in this state pervaded with tenderness and compassion. Thus joint terror and compassion are the pivot of the new beginnings the artist has been trying to discover and whose significance he now ponders:

Was all this – in the form of the man in my studio – a symptom of Faustian immortal Time that steals and brings back what it steals in unpredictable ways? It was and it was not. It was a radical penetration of Faustian Time away from a singular, absolute Face into mutualities between the negligible and the apparently fixed and formal, between upwards and downwards, between glimpses of the Sky that stretches into infinity and glimpses of the Earth that baffles life and finity, between loathing and love, between what one creates that re-creates the depths one has missed. (167)

This achievement of 'mutualities' and balance is clearly not final or ultimate, for immediately afterwards the artist unthinkingly hits the Child-like Man with the Stone and the Man fires and strikes the artist's self-portrait with its many faces on the wall. The police then arrive and arrest him. In other words, the material world of appearances always reasserts itself. The dream and the artist's last work of art make it clear that there can be no final solution to the world's conflicts.

The artist's last thoughts are a further meditation on the role of art following his relationship with the Child-Man, who had told him, 'Art springs from life. Or is it life that springs from art?' (164).³⁷ The two possibilities are confirmed by the artist who first thinks 'I had propelled [the Child-Man] onto an Ocean of Space like one coming from neglected areas of the Imagination upon a watershed of Times' (170), then 'I had made a real man, if nothing else, from a dot in my notebooks' (171). It suggests that the material and the imaginary worlds are equally real. Harris, however, does not idealize art which, being man-made, can never be wholly consummate. Van Gogh (whom he greatly admires) had been so affected by such limitations that he committed suicide, and Wilde could not pursue his 'attempt to bridge subjective place with the mysterious life of the arts' after he came out of prison (169).

Harris's purpose since *Palace of the Peacock* has been to approach, however glimmeringly and in flashes of intuition, what he once called 'the *inimitable* ground of being'.³⁸ This novel criticizes more explicitly than ever both a purely materialistic and technological civilization and

the kind of fiction which fails to probe the deeper motivations and emotions that threaten human beings when they run berserk. This criticism is counterpointed by his perception of both outer and inner spiritual life, of human existence interwoven with all elements in nature and the universe, of a bridge between cultures inherent in what he calls 'cross-cultural psyche'. This perception informs the manifold imageries that orchestrate a multi-levelled, dynamic reality which, ideally, one should grasp comprehensively. But, as Harris insists through his fiction and essays, human perceptions are necessarily partial and therefore wholeness is unattainable in both life and fiction. Which is why his own work, like the existential process he has so eloquently interpreted, can only be an 'unfinished genesis'. At the end of his fictional autobiography in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, the narrator wonders, 'Whose hand would seek mine, whose mask become my age in the future?'³⁹ After his encounter with the Child-Man in *The Mask of the Beggar*, the artist also anticipates that his art will be carried on by other creators:

I could not believe it but the listening feeling persisted in a non-burning quality that would require future Imaginations beyond me, future Imaginations that would link many-framed forms of music into the rhythms of language. (171-72)

NOTES

- Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, trans. Jean Starr Untermeyer, with an introduction by Bernard Levin ([1945]; Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 146, 344, 408-409. The novel is an imaginary recreation of Virgil's last eighteen hours. The last section, 'Homecoming', is a stream-of-consciousness prose poem evoking Virgil's visions as he enters into death.
- Wilson Harris, *The Mask of the Beggar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
- Wilson Harris, *The Dark Jester* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. vii.
- West Street is a location already mentioned in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965). The Beggar is a major figure in *Black Marsden* (1972) and, in one guise at least, already seems to appear from nowhere as an otherworldly character.
- In the return of the mother, Harris sees a parallel with a Byzantine painting (p. 11) in which Christ gives rebirth to his dead mother. He has also mentioned elsewhere Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*, a sculpture of Christ carrying his mother 'who hovers on the verge between life and death'. See Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), unpaginated illustrations between pp. 146 and 147.
- Wilson Harris, *Heartland* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 43.
- See Wilson Harris, 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', *New Left Review* 154 (December 1985), 124-128. In *Jonestown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996) Bone and Deacon are 'adversarial twins'.
- Wilson Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 51.
- This is a recurring event in Harris's fiction, inspired by the disappearance of his own father and step-father in the Guyanese interior. On this subject see Harris's autobiographical essay, *Wilson Harris. Contemporary Authors. Autobiographies Series 16* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992).
- Cf. Harris who, at the age of eight, was already reading *The Odyssey* and had met a beggar in the street. See his autobiographical essay.
- On Harris's transformative re-writings of Homeric episodes, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Ulyssean Carnival: Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's Trilogy', *Callaloo*, 18.1 (Winter, 1995), 46-58.
- Harris speaks of 'creative forces that penetrate or make fissures in eternity', 'The Quest for Form', *Kunapipi*, v.1 (1983), 21-27; 22.
- The Four Banks of the River of Space*, p. 15.
- Wilson Harris, 'The Fabric of the Imagination', *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1992), pp. 18-29; 23.
- Already in *Tradition the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Press, 1967), Harris suggests that when Ulysses is tied to the mast of his ship to listen to the Sirens, the mast 'becomes an extension of his body' and he talks of 'a community of animate and inanimate features', pp. 52-53. This is a recurring feature in his fiction.
- Nick Herbert, *Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics* (London: Hutchinson, 1985).
- John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 52.
- 'Wilson Harris - An Interview by Helen Tiffin', *New Literature Review* 7 (September 1979), 18-29; 24.
- The Four Banks of the River of Space*, p. 32.
- This is a simplified formulation of ramifications expressed through varied imagery.
- Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), p. 141.
- Ibid.*, p. 164.
- See also Wilson Harris, 'Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror: Reflections on Originality and Tradition', *Wasafiri*, 20 (Autumn 1994), 38-43.
- 'The Fabric of the Imagination', p. 21.
- Carnival in Harris's fiction is a metaphor for creation. On this subject see Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Carnival and Creativity in Wilson Harris's Fiction', *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*, ed. Michael Gilkes (Basingstone: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 45-61.
- Exact reproductions are a realistic rendering of a surface reality. Hence the inexactitude of the characters he discovers in the abyss of Time and history. See the 'inexact' small man, p. 153.
- Cf. *The Odyssey*, Song ix. Harris frequently adapts Odyssean episodes in his fiction. The artist says here, 'Cyclopean blindness rules the world as it did in Homer's age', p. 110.
- In Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965) and in some later novels, 'It' represents the Spirit or the essence of the spiritual.
- Non-burning fire is a frequent feature in Harris's fiction similar to the 'fiery furnace' episode in the Book of Daniel.
- One must keep in mind that in Harris's fiction dream opens the way to the unconscious towards which the protagonist is travelling.
- See a similar community of being in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*: '[Penelope]

- shared the material substance of my thoughts even as I penetrated hers', p. 23.
32. See *Jonestown* and *The Dark Jester*.
33. Wilson Harris, *Carnival* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), p. 25.
34. I am grateful for this explanation to Jean-Clair Duschene, a Professor of geology at the University of Liège.
35. Wilson Harris, *Ascent to Omai* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970).
36. The crash is often a re-enactment of the catastrophes responsible for so many dismemberments in men and societies but which, for Harris, could have led, or can lead, to regeneration.
37. Cf. Oscar Wilde, 'life is the reflection of literature'.
38. *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, p. 51.
39. Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 82.