Wilson Harris's 'Guiana Quartet': from personal myth to national identity

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VERY little criticism of Wilson Harris's novels has discovered the most immediate explanation of the problems his specific works present. But the author himself has supplied the intelligent and sensitive reader with plentiful hints of explanations, both in the way that he has aligned himself with a well-known, well-established tradition, and in the way he has orchestrated that tradition so that his work may become the embodiment of his own Guianese culture. Mr Harris has, however, successfully adapted a famous tradition in a very special way.

At the gateway to the *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) stands a quotation taken from Yeats's poem, 'Under Ben Bulben', which explores the methods by which an author shapes the consciousness of his people. This quotation is supported by two others that direct a reader firmly to the symbolist tradition of English poetry and to an expanded understanding of Mr Harris's *Guiana Quartet*. A quotation from Blake calls attention to the process whereby history is transformed into myth through the inspiration of an author; and finally a quotation from 1 Kings xix, 12, designates the type of history explored and gives reasons for this exploration: 'After the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.' Quite boldly the author points out that his *Quartet* begins with the still small voice that is not meditating on the great events of the past, because the Lord is not in them; rather, the first movement of the *Quartet* narrates the events of a singularly unusual but not spectacular river trip. The significance of this trip has been the concern of several critics, and their attempt to distinguish the various trips and the various historical characters has resulted in

much speculation; but, if we follow for a moment the indication Wilson Harris himself gives at the beginning of the work, that he is dealing with the non-spectacular history of his people which has become formative myth, the difficulties disappear. It is unimportant which Donne, which trip, which crew is being discussed, because the formative influence of the myth of the trip has another purpose unconnected with a particular event or character; indeed concern for particulars directly opposes the purpose of the work.[1] Harris has gone to great lengths to redirect the reader's apprehension, or as he will later call it, 'inapprehension'. An example may clarify the point. Harris writes:

> They did not know how to trust their own emotion, almost on the verge of doubting the stream in their midst. Old Schomburgh looked as timeless as every member of the crew. Carroll, Vigilance, Wishrop, the daSilva twins. The wooden-faced, solemn-looking Jennings stood under the disc and toy that had spun the grave propeller of the world. Where there had been death was now the reflection of life. The unexpected image of Donne awoke a quiver of sudden alarm and fright. A heavy shadow fell upon all of us — upon the Mission, the trees, the wind, the water. It was an ominous and disturbing symptom of retiring gloom and darkened understanding under the narrow chink and ribbon of sky. They shrank from us as from a superstition of dead men. Donne had had a bad name in the savannahs, and Mariella, to their dreaming knowledge, had been abused and ill-treated by him, and had ultimately killed him.[2]

This extended quotation is no ordinary passage of prose, nor does it merely exhibit — as some critics would like to dismiss it — the enthusiasm of the author for words. Yet the author is using his vocabulary in a singularly unusual way: 'timeless . . . crew', 'stood under the disc and toy . . . grave propeller of the world', the blurring of the Donne characters. The whole passage, in short, is using vocabulary in a specifically poetic way. If we have been following the author's directions, we should see that these passages are a description and synthesis of many events that have been mythologized through the consciousness of many people;

[1] This remark arises from an impatience derived from reading many unjust reviews both favourable and unfavourable, of Harris's work, but it does not in any way pertain to the excellent article on Harris by Mr John Hearne, 'The Fugitive in the Forest . . .', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, IV, December, 1967, 99–112.

[2] Wilson Harris, *The Palace of the Peacock*, 1960, p. 38. For other examples of the same type of writing, see also pp. 40, 46, 48, 94, 110, 130, 140, 146, 150–2.

and the reason why this trip has been fashioned by the author from many levels of conscious and unconscious history has already been explained by Blake:

> It ceases to be history and becomes . . fabricated for pleasure, as moderns say, but I say by Inspiration.

This quotation from Blake is a functional example of another author successfully initiating another tradition of formation for another culture; it is a functional hieroglyph of the successful unconscious myth at the gate of the Palace.

If *Palace of the Peacock* is a tale of the formative myths of a culture, and not a specific tale of individual human experience, then the whole problem of the multidimensional and logical relations between different levels of particular narrated experience vanishes, or rather is subsumed into a much more complex consciousness that is atemporal and aspacial. Also, the whole problem of the relationship between the narrator and the activity he narrates must be reconsidered, because the narrator is both a part of the story and 'the still small voice' after the fire.

The author does not leave the reader floundering, for the first section of Book One specifically indicates the way to approach the river trip. The dream which opens the book is the product of the unconscious mind developed from the imaginative working of childhood hero-worship. The imaginative activity of the half-seeing brother has transformed the image of the active, wild, rather cruel, older brother into hero, the historical figure Donne and finally into unconscious myth or dream which shapes the dreamer's life. The activity of the activist and ruler, dimmed by time, becomes the inspiration for the *persona* of the dreamer, and the dream becomes an operative reality. After moving from Blake's statement to the reiteration of the statement by Yeats, to the poetic, parabolic and functional transformation of the statement into Guianese terms, Section Two of Book One launches the river journey with the full implication of its meaning: 'The map of the savannahs was a dream.'

Although the *persona* of the narrator, the dreaming voice, never undergoes the transformation that is the actual experience of the river trip beyond Mariella, he does make several statements about his own relationship to that trip or those trips. In Section Five of Book One, after the crew have arrived at Mariella, the

narrator dreams again; he tries actively to mount the dream, become a part of the activity that is the real history of the people. He explains the result of his own efforts in these terms:

I sat bolt upright in my hammock, shouting aloud that the devil himself must fondle and mount this muse of hell and this hag, sinking back instantly, a dead man in his bed come to an involuntary climax. The grey wet dream of dawn had restored to me Mariella's terrible stripes and anguish of soul. (p. 46)

This image of impotency opposed as it is to subconscious activity is a further indication that the narrator will never be able to complete the trip except in a most unusual way; he will only be able to transform it through his unconscious inspiration. Later he reaches the moment of choice:

How could I surrender myself to be drawn two ways at once? Indeed what a phenomenon it was to have pulled me, even in the slightest degree, away from nature's end and wish, and towards the eternal desire and spirit that charged the selfsame wish of death with shades of mediation, precept upon precept in itself but another glimmering shadow hedging the vision and the glory and the light. (p. 48)

After this struggle between activity and passivity, between doing and dreaming, the narrator moves on to the more difficult task of defining that which is the real motivating force behind the unconscious elements of the narrative and the role of the 'narrator' in bringing these to light. Although his statement at first seems rather difficult and obscure, it is nevertheless an important and accurate general explanation of Harris's own method of writing and a general description of his stylistic technique and objectives:

'We're all outside of the folk' I said musingly. 'Nobody belongs yet . . .'

'Is it a mystery of language and address?' Donne asked quickly and mockingly.

'Language, address?' I found it hard to comprehend what he meant. 'There is one dreaming language I know off . . .' I rebuked him . . . 'which is the same for every man . . . No it's not language. It's . . . it's . . .' I searched for words with a sudden terrible rage at the difficulty I experienced . . . 'it's an inapprehension of substance,' . . .

The narrator continues his explanation:

And somebody,' I declared 'must demonstrate the unity of being, and show . . .' I had grown violent and emphatic . . . 'that fear is nothing

but a dream and an appearance . . . even death . . .' I stopped abruptly. (p. 59)

If this passage is to have any clear meaning, it can only do so in the tradition of Blake and Yeats which transforms history into myth by the creative unconscious. The narrator is stating that the function of language and address is twofold: improper, to communicate dead material reality, or living active reality (and here language is always inadequate, communication always fails); or proper, through the inspirational use of language to shatter material, 'dead reality' in the Blakean or Yeatsian sense, to present 'The inapprehension of substance', the living reality which underlies or 'demonstrates the unity of being'. This is the first statement of the narrator about the use of language, logical narrative, any of the conventional techniques that one comes to expect in the novel form. But adding it to the accumulated indications already given, this passage becomes an important landmark when reading *Palace of the Peacock*. The narrator—dreamer continues the use of the first person, his presence in the narrative until the end of Book Two at which point the reader is invited to consider carefully the second mode of his initiation into the author's purpose, that of creating the unconscious myth that he is pursuing.

Book Three, 'The Second Death', begins with a quotation from John Donne's 'Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness', and both in its original context within the poem, and as a signpost for *Palace of the Peacock* presents further indications for the careful reader. The first verse of Donne's poem is well known:

> Since I am coming to that holy room,
> Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy music, as I come
> I tune the instrument here at the door,
> And what I must do then, think here before.

If we recall the end of *Palace of the Peacock*, we will remember that in fact the narrator is transformed into the experience of music, 'Carroll whistled to all who had lost love in the world' and this sound became the music of the Palace and the ultimate experience that all undergo in the Palace — the dancer becomes the dance.

But before that can be accomplished the continual close reading must be followed step by step. Literally, the Donne

quotation says that, like the *persona* of the poet, before the *persona* of this narrative can be transformed into the music, he must stop at the door and think on the experience; quite literally this is what happens to the narrator of the *Palace* as Book Two moves through 'The Second Death', which is simultaneously the seven days of creation. However, the first person narrator who participated in the action of Book One does not disappear completely; on the first day of creation he is still a part of the group included in the 'we' of the crew:

> The crew came around like one man to the musing necessity in the journey beyond Mariella. We set out in the rising sun as soon as the mist had vanished (p. 71).

Although the narrator has stopped participating in the 'dead activity' of history, nevertheless he does continue on for the first day of creation as part of the we that is the crew. But Harris is careful to clear up any contradiction in this situation: the Donne quotation indicated that the *persona* of the narrator would continue the activity of thinking and as the text indicates, the first day of creation is the 'straits of memory':

> Before the sun was much higher we were in the grip of the straits of memory. The sudden dreaming fury of the stream was nought else but the ancient spit of all flying insolence in the voiceless and terrible humility of the folk. (p. 73)

To the extent that the narrator can participate in the 'dead activity' of history, he may do so through memory; but he as narrator has resolved his conflict between 'dead reality' and the myth of the unconscious 'living death'.

By the end of the first day, the narrator has reached his limit: 'We stood on the frontiers of the known world, and on the self-same threshold of the unknown' (p. 92). At this point a gradual divorce takes place between the *persona* of the narrator and the rest of the crew. After the burial of Carroll and Schomburgh, the narrator observes (and we notice once again the observation is in connection with language):

> The *broken* speech of the crew *died* awhile on their lips though in their affections they still heard themselves speak in the old manner of distortion and debasement. It was the inevitable and unconscious universe of art and life that still harassed and troubled them. (p. 93)

This passage only yields the fullness of its meaning if we notice that the narrative shifts into the third person, and if we recognize that it 'was the inevitable and unconscious universe of art and life that *still* harassed and troubled *them*' but not the narrator. At this point, it becomes functionally necessary for the purpose of the novel that the narrative should shift into the third person. The crew, in opposition to the dreaming narrator, have a lesson to learn or unlearn, which, as Harris has been careful to point out, the narrator has never learned. On the second day of creation the crew

> had passed the door of inner perception like a bird of spirit breaking the shell of the sky which had been the only conscious world all knew. In the death of their comrades, . . . they had started on the way to overcoming a sacred convention of evil proprietorship and gain.

Although the crew are doomed to continue in the active world that they may learn the difference between dead and living reality, there is no need for the narrator to participate, and the entire narrative continues in the third person.

The second day releases the crew from the fetters of reality manifested in 'proprietorship and gain'; the third day of creation demanded that there be

> no simple bargain and treaty possible save unconditional surrender to what they knew not. Call it spirit, call it life, call it the end of all they had once treasured and embraced in blindness and ignorance and obstinacy they knew. They were the pursuers and now they had become the pursued. (p. 106)

The fourth day of creation calls for a renunciation of the very idea of creative activity 'in which he saw the blind dream of creation crumble as it was re-enacted' (p. 124). Only at this point could the next movement begin; only then could the unconscious myth of the culture be formed through 'Paling of Ancestors'.

The quotation introducing the 'Paling of Ancestors' was selected from Hopkins and once again is functional:

> This piece — bright paling shuts the spouse
> Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

Rather than separating the narrator from the rest of the events, all the characters are now ready for the final transformation — the quotation applies equally to all. With the gradual stripping off of the dead real world, with the 'paling' of conscious dead

creation, every crew member of every trip may attain the proper state of immateriality to participate in the Palace of the Peacock. Although the Hopkins quotation demonstrated this fact as a functional experience taken from Anglo-Welsh culture, Harris is careful not only to keep the best, but to transform the function into a Guianese experience.

Section Ten of Book Four bursts through to the 'inapprehension of substance' as the remnant of the crew ascend the ladder of the waterfalls to the Palace. Little by little the work of the poet-novelist transforms physical creation into a state of immaterial being, the precise purpose of the first quartet: 'It was the seventh day from Mariella. And the creation of the windows of the universe was finished' (p. 144). At this point the *persona* of the first person dreamer returns. He as artist/dreamer, or as Blake expressed it 'by Inspiration', has prepared himself to take part in the final sections of the book by thinking. 'The eye and window [of the Peacock] through which I looked stood now in the dreaming forehead at the top of the cliff in the sky' (p. 144).

Although the active characters have reached the unconscious state of myth, it is only the dreaming narrator who can communicate the *inapprehension of substance* to the reader. He uses fluid visual imagery and the transformed images of music to do so; and the experience is communicated emotionally to the reader. Quite boldly yet justly the narrator can write, 'Idle now to dwell upon and recall anything one had ever responded to with the sense and sensibility that were our outward manner and vanity and conceit . . .' Boldly yet justly he aligns himself through his use of imagery with the established tradition from Blake and Yeats: 'It was the dance of all fulfilment I now held and knew deeply'; nevertheless, the tradition has been transformed into the unconscious myth of Guiana, not England nor Ireland: 'This was the inner music and voice of the peacock I suddenly encountered and echoed and sang as I had never heard myself sing before' (p. 152).

And so we see that following the tradition of Swedenborg, Blake, and Yeats, Harris perceives three great principles or degrees in the universe: the emotional, the intellectual, and the natural. Of these, the emotional, dreaming principle is the highest; only it can shatter and transform history. It possesses

neither form nor substance, its tendency being to burst bounds and shatter forms to attain the 'inapprehension of substance'. In the *Palace of the Peacock* the perception of the absolute separation of these degrees Harris describes as the first postulate of all mystics and creators of national myths. The materialist's search for truth, on the other hand, is based on the belief that natural and spiritual things do not essentially differ, since, the materialist sees the solution of problems of mental life from an analysis of external nature and attempts to build up spiritual systems from impressions derived from outer nature and the five senses.

In the three poems which conclude *Heartland* (1964), Mr Harris makes several significant statements about his method of writing and these three poems help to explain the 'meaning' of the Guiana *Quartet*.

In 'Behring Straits' he writes:

> The tremendous voyage between two worlds
> is contained in every hollow shell, in every name
> that echoes
> a nameless bell,
> in tree-trunk or cave
> or in a sound . . .

If these lines could be distorted into prose, they would indicate the poet's belief that a pattern exists in all things, not as a material reality, but as a relationship to another world. The poem continues the development of this belief with the lines:

> The voyage between two worlds
> is fraught with this grandeur and this anonymity.
> Who blazes a trail
> is overtaken by a labyrinth
> leading to many conclusions.

This patterned activity then, the voyage, has an aspect about it at once known and unknown, the conclusion of which is not predictable. Nevertheless, the fragment concludes with the statement that a pattern

> must arise unerringly
> into an outline or alienation or history
> into a bond that both strengthens and severs in the
> movement of life . . .

Mr Harris, then, is describing the recognition of a process, patterned but not causally predictable, a pattern which is necessary

in order to have any type of understood experience, but an essential part of which is the opposition between a recognition of the pattern which strengthens movement and the thing itself which is causally severed and capable of infinite conclusions. The fragment 'Amazon' casts further light on the poet's belief:

> This living jungle is too filled with voices
> not to be aware of collectivity
> and too swift with unseen wings
> to capture certainty.

The relationship between the two fragments, then, affirms a pattern which leads to collectivity, but denies structurally (by the fragmentary character of the two poems, as well as the images of 'The Behring Straits' and the 'swift unseen wings') any logical certainty.

Harris the symbolist and mystic, following Blake, Yeats, and, as we shall see, Eliot, seems to see the relation between the emotional, intellectual, and natural in terms of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences and differences. Swedenborg distinguished two types of differences, 'continuous and discrete'; continuous degrees are determined by respective distances and diminish in intensity the further they recede from the source; with discrete differences, on the other hand, what matters is the relation between 'prior' and the 'posterior', between 'cause and effect', between 'that which produces and that which is produced'. Continuous relates everything to external nature; discrete admits the existence of a world beyond the world of the senses. The materialist thinker sees only continuous differences because he conceives of the mind as actually one with the physical organism and consequently he attempts to understand the self-sufficient world of man's thoughts through scientific investigations of external nature. But no amount of natural observations, Harris will argue, can of itself awake into being or open the intellectual faculties. The intellectual faculties, however, must accompany the action of the observations and sensations from the first, and are indeed the primary condition of their existence. Sensations and observations are merely the symbols or correspondence whereby the intellectual nature realizes or grows conscious of itself in detail. Indeed, the true relation between external nature and internal thought, Harris seems to argue, is

only to be understood in terms of correspondences, as developed through Blake and Yeats. Being no product of nature, it has nothing to do with scientific demonstration, but whether embodied in the metaphors of poetry or asserted in elaborate mysticism, it represents the intuitive grasp of the symbolic relation between outer and inner, and thus the instantaneous embodiment and assertion of truth. For the very reason that it is implicit rather than explicit, a correspondence or symbol says something far more laden with meaning than a logical narrative line, a scientific observation, or many pages of simple geographical or psychological description.[1] This is quite obviously the central theme and consideration of *The Secret Ladder* (1963). This novel shows Wilson Harris performing within the tradition of modern symbolist writing, yet varying that tradition to make it truly his own. In it Fenwick begins measuring external data scientifically on the ladder of his gauges, comes to the realization that the rivers of Guiana are ladders of the history of the country, but more importantly arrives at the 'Reading', this time after seven days of recreation, through the secret ladder of conscience.

By the time he published *The Secret Ladder*, Mr Harris's method of writing was well established, and the structure and symbolism yield an extremely rich and complex meaning. The three quotations which introduce the book present a clear and firm direction: the first from Blake calls attention to the dichotomy of spirit and flesh and indicates to the reader that he will begin the novel with vegetable eyes — blind to true spiritual vision. The second quotation from Mayer presents the theme of the book in the seminal form of logical statement, for Harris, the rational content but not the immaterial symbolic experience, which language is capable of communicating.

> There is in nature, a specific dimension of immaterial constitution which preserves its value in all changes, whereas its form of appearance alters in the most manifold ways.

The third quotation specifies the mode of the final resolution.

Book One, 'The Day Readers', begins with the intention of the conscious dead world in the ascendance; the quotation from

[1] The full study of this tradition will appear next year in the Introduction to R. O'Driscoll's *Blake, Ellis and Yeats*, to be published by Oxford University Press. Professor O'Driscoll has kindly given me permission to use this summary here.

Browning calls attention to a theme explored in *Palace of the Peacock*, the dominant characteristic of conscious activity being fear. In Book One the plans of the rational conscious, civilized world are implemented by Fenwick; this presentation includes his ability to handle the situation in which he finds himself and his men in an attempt to measure the water level of the Canje scientifically. Book One spans the first four days of the new creation. Nevertheless, from the opening of the book, Harris begins his assault on the 'inapprehension of substance'; the Guianese rivers become 'the curious rungs in a ladder on which one sets one's musing foot again and again, to climb into both the past and the future of the continent of mystery' (p. 20). The old fisherman-farmer, Poseidon, is transformed into the river god, the 'Black King of history whose sovereignty over the past was a fluid crown of possession and dispossession' (p. 22), as well as 'an old bent artifice of a man', the apprehension of whom leads Fenwick to realize he can no longer 'rid himself of the deamon of freedom and imagination and responsibility'. The two images of the ladder and Poseidon then mesh when 'Poseidon had been hooked and nailed to a secret ladder of conscience however crumbling and extreme the image was' (p. 24). At this point the 'inapprehension of substance' begins to take shape. On the second day, in the letter Fenwick writes to his mother, Poseidon becomes the symbol of 'an abortive movement, the emotional and political germ of which has been abused in two centuries of history . . . the emotional dynamic of liberation that happened a century and a quarter ago', a movement that was 'all too emotional, too blinding, this freedom that has turned cruel, abortive, evasive, woolly and wild everywhere almost' (pp. 38–9). These musings lead Fenwick to consider that 'If this threat of uprising can remain bloodless and still be truly successful it may clear the air for good and restore something we have all lost — the authority and the psyche of freedom' (p. 40). Poseidon, then, becomes for Fenwick the real challenge on the secret ladder of conscience.

Having gone this far, Fenwick does not shy away from the full complexity of the question. At their next meeting he thinks:

> I confess I owe allegiance to him because of his condition, allegiance of an important kind, that of conscience, of the rebirth of humanity. And this is the highest form of allegiance of all. It is the kind a man

gives to a god. But surely this does not mean I must reduce myself to his trapped condition, become even less human than he, a mere symbol and nothing more, in order to worship him! I would be mad.

Maybe that is why Poseidon is a god, after all. [Fenwick continues] He teaches us the terrifying depth of our human allegiance, our guilt in the face of humanity, our subservience to the human condition. But he cannot force us, surely, to make an idol of this present degrading form -- crawl on our bellies in order to make ourselves less than he is, tie ourselves into knots in order to enslave ourselves deeper than he is. (p. 51)

The character Bryant, takes another position:

'I want him to accept me like a lost son . . . I would pay him all the price he want.' He stopped, thinking he had said far too much. 'Don't worry with me, skipper. Is just a figure of speech I was using.'

Fenwick immediately picks up the dialogue:

'Is it a figure of speech?' . . . 'You'll make him suffer, Bryant, if you're not careful, in a worse way than he's suffered before. You will even kill him in the end.' (p. 53)

This unbridled desire of Bryant, opposed to the more serious considerations of Fenwick, does work out the prophecy which Fenwick makes on the second day of recreation. The conclusion of Book One calls attention to the seven days of recreation, emphasizing once again the difference between the dead world of appearances and the real world of the spirit or myth:

Four days had seen the task begun and far advanced of dismantling a prison of appearance. Seven days it had taken to finish the original veil of creation that shaped and ordered all things to be solid in the beginning. So the oldest fable ran. Perhaps seven, too, were needed to strip and subtilize everything. Seven days which would run in logical succession in time but nevertheless would be appointed or chosen from the manuscript of all the spiritual seasons that had ever been . . . all would be strung together like a new immaterial genesis and condition. (p. 74)

In Fenwick's life, recreation is being effected as he himself realized; on the second day 'he had been driven to confess his rhetoric and sterility in the face of duty mortgaged to a maternal shell' (p. 74).

Book Two, 'The Night Readers' presents the unconscious, primitive forces which are unleashed against the rational scientific project. These forces emanate from two characters, Poseidon and Catalina Perez. At the conclusion of the novel Poseidon dies,

in a fated effort of impotent rage, while trying to impose the older native authority upon the female principle. He becomes the symbol of the former order which is subsumed and transformed. Catalina Perez is the dark female sexual principle to which all the men react. Perez is brute lust; Jordan, Wing, and Ching are reactions of rivalry, fear, and hatred, and Bryant is the quantum which activates both Poseidon and Catalina into the higher synthesis. As the unconscious forces of 'The Night Readers' begins to affect the project strongly, the rational element becomes transformed under the stress. The quotation from Pasternack which begins Book Two states that there is no escape from the problems posed because all the characters are 'Eternity's hostage / Captive to time'. Fenwick himself realizes more and more clearly 'how frightful and strange was the role of consciousness he played' (p. 99), in opposition to the conflict of unconscious emotion around him. Yet it is Fenwick who has 'The Reading' at the end of the six days.

The clash of forces are gradually resolved in a series of events which include the victimization of Chuing, the disobedience of Catalina, the defection of Bryant, and the death of Poseidon. The higher synthesis which the death ushers in includes all the previous history even though the unconscious 'inapprehension of this substance', Fenwick's dream, is not understood even by himself. Nevertheless, the dream, as the final variation on the central image of the book, is the dream of Jacob; the ladder of ascent and descent is the true Secret Ladder which includes all the overtones of creating a new people and being at the beginning and end of a new race. But Fenwick is not only having Jacob's dream and thereby establishing a new people, the images are not only alluding to the scriptural creation of a new people, but Fenwick is also having the dream of the modern poetic creation of the new race through the liberated spiritual imagination — as developed from Swedenborg, Blake, Yeats and Eliot.

> It seemed that an inquisition of dead gods and heroes had ended, an inquiry into the dramatic role of conscience in time and being, the dangers of mortal ascent and immortal descent. The one chosen from amongst them to descend was crying something Fenwick was unable to fathom but the echoes of annunciation grew on every hand and became resonant with life . . . In our end . . . our end . . . our end is

our beginning . . . beginning . . . beginning. Fenwick awoke. It was the dawn of the seventh day. (p. 126–7)

Harris is consciously playing a variation on the well-known passage from Section Five of 'Little Gidding', the last of Eliot's *Four Quartets*; by so doing he is aligning himself once again with the poetic tradition, but is also adding all the richer implications of the most classically existential quotation in the book:

> We are born with the dead:
> See, they return, and bring us with them.
> The moment of the rose and the moment of the Yew tree
> Are of equal duration. A people without history
> Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
> Of timeless moments.

Eliot's words not only indicate a method for reading the final section of *The Secret Ladder*, they also invite the reader to consider *The Guiana Quartet* within that well-known tradition: being born again through the artist's recreation of the dead Donne, Oudin, Christo, Abram, Poseidon; experiencing the four timeless moments of *Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *The Whole Armour*, and *The Secret Ladder*, which are a finished *Guiana Quartet* and do reveal not a people without a history, but a history that is a pattern of timeless moments.

Mother and child

Lighter by a life, you settle back
into a dune of pillows;
remembering, as the tide runs slack,
its current the night it rose
wrestling through you, lifting inland
the unknown here, at the tide's return,
made known, breathing under your hand.

Black grapes, as long in the growing, torn
from shrunk capilliaries of the vine,
bleed in your mouth, letting the rain
sucked by the sun from the raw earth
run back into the earth again.

JON STALLWORTHY