

*Wilson Harris at Work:
The Texas Manuscripts with Special
Reference to the Mayakovsky Resonance
in "Ascent to Omai"*

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WILSON HARRIS is a difficult writer. His work is formidable. It is a body of material which most commentators acknowledge to be central to an understanding of the activity of men, society, and history in the Caribbean. His novels are a constant hermeneutic activity around some of the most fundamental concerns of human existence. They are self-conscious about themselves to such an intense degree that their energies threaten constantly to turn *inwards* toward the heart of a particular novel, *backwards* toward the memory and heartland of previous novels. It is as if the flow of *imagined life* constantly threatens to slow down into a silted, stilted mass of language, image, and concept. Many people find Wilson Harris difficult to read. This is not surprising. Wilson Harris, I imagine, finds it difficult to write, and a fair amount of his non-fictional energies have been spent working out critical signposts and new conceptions of the novel which would enable his writing to show forth in its revolutionary and wrestled-for clarity.

The most interesting commentary on Harris (Ramchand, Howard, Maes-Jelinek, Rolston Adams) has attempted to enlarge the conceptual clearings that *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, and a scattering of lectures by Harris have opened up. The early poetry has been examined in relation to the novels; the internal activity of various novels has been patiently considered. C. L. R. James has sketched in the evoked shadows of Heidegger and Sartre. Michael Gilkes has courageously and with

some success, tackled most of Harris's work up to 1972 and *Black Marsden*. A good deal remains to be done, however, before the enigmatic quality of his idiom and the "idiosyncratic" nature of his concerns recedes. One of these "things to be done" is for us to get a firmer grasp of Harris's method of writing — his process of creation.

In an article on "Harris: The Pre-novel Poet," Rolston Adams acknowledged that "Harris became better known for his novels after he had written an autobiographical novel, 'Almanac of a Jumbi,' later rewritten as 'Horseman, Pass By,' and finally rewritten after several drafts, as *Palace of the Peacock*. It is a great loss to Harrisean research that both early manuscripts of *Palace* are no longer extant."¹

I have always been fascinated by Harris and from my earliest reading of *Palace of the Peacock* asked myself: what would an earlier version of this kind of novel look like? Or: how would one get from an early conception of such a subject to the finished text? If one is prepared to accept Harris as an important thinker about the modern novel and a distinguished practitioner of what he preaches, the early state of a Harris text becomes important.

When I was on leave at the University of Texas in 1977, I stumbled on exactly this kind of material, touching on five novels:

Ascent to Omai (1970)
Sleepers of Roraima (1970)
Age of the Rainmakers (1971)
Black Marsden (1972)
Companions of Day and Night (1975)

Here was the opportunity to see Wilson Harris at work, and to see what kind of continuity existed in his career between, roughly, the years 1968-1975, at a high point in his career.

I shall begin by making some overview remarks about these manuscripts, and then look at an actual example: the Mayakovsky reference in *Ascent to Omai*.

The preliminary typescript version of *Ascent to Omai* is dated 17 May 1968. Total length 180 pages.

The observation is made by Harris that "the first draft of this novel grew out of the early scenes of a play I started in January 1968 entitled *Dead Men's Shoes*."²

Some of this material is included in a manuscript of 113 pages covering "alternative routes the novel could have taken which were abandoned."³

Occasionally, there are interpolations in the preliminary typescript. On page 4 one finds this note:

Stedman: *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. 1772-1777. Lond. 1796. Royal Commonwealth Library, West India Committee Library. It is in two volumes and illustrated by Bartalozzi and Blake.⁴

A scratch sheet dated separately 17 May 1968 becomes page 5 of the preliminary typescript. On it one finds Harris juggling with what will eventually be the Contents page. The final text published in 1970 is divided in this way:

Book I Omai Chasm
Book II Ascent
Book III Omai

The scratch sheet reads thus:

~~—SHAMAN—~~ ASSENT TO OMAI
~~—OMAI CHASM—~~
~~—THEATRE OF SUBSISTENCE—~~
~~—OPUS CONTRA NATURAM—~~
by
Wilson Harris
Book I ~~—LIMBO—~~ OMAI CHASM
Book II ~~—DANCE OF THE IMMORTALS—~~
ASSENT TO OMAI
Book III OMAI⁵

The possible titles together with the rejection of limbo and dance of the immortals as section captions suggest different conceptions Harris had of his novel until a late stage of composition.

Companions of the Day and Night has a draft typescript (85 pp.) based on four notebooks. Harris prefaced these materials with a comment about the typescript:

It carries the framework *through* which — after careful revision and close attention to areas of development seen as a whole — the final shape of the book emerged in a final typescript. Certain scenes in this draft typescript were revised or abandoned entirely.⁶

I think the priority, in the process of composition, of *framework*, is interesting; the suggested "compartmentalization" of areas of development for close attention throws some light on the magnification effect which some episodes in a Harris novel have relative to others. It is also of interest that Harris, as always, emphasizes the word *through*: the draft typescript *works with* the framework but also *through* it, and it is the dialogue between the "with" and the "through" that provides Harris with his sense of the controlling whole which disciplines and coerces the separate areas of development. This is by way of addressing the bristling compacted unevenness of a Wilson Harris fiction. As he says of Nameless's canvasses and sculptures in a cancelled section of the Editor's Introduction to *Companions of the Day and Night*: "It was possible to read his stories as real episodes, sometimes as *participation mystique*."⁷

In the case of *Black Marsden* we have a first working draft dated 4 April 1971; alternative sketches; and 401 pages of rough drafts (typescript and autograph) preceding a final, clean, typescript.

Harris has placed a descriptive note before this file:

Sections of this material excluded from [A: the final typescript], indicate the direction the novel began to explore then abandoned. They are implicit gestures nevertheless or signposts that bear upon contrasting codes that feed a capacity for self-judgement.

Tabula Rasa is used in an ironical sense. To wipe the slate clean is to be susceptible to deeply concealed new potentialities/perspectives as well as *apparently* eclipsed forces and bases.⁸

It is of interest here that the abandoned directions still exert a gravitational force, as implicit gesture, in the final text.

The interpretation of the concept of *tabula rasa* as ironic, given the central place of this concept in *Black Marsden* and the body of Harris's work is important.

The Age of the Rainmakers exists in the form of typescript and autograph drafts (75 pages and extra, miscellaneous pages numbered and unnumbered). These include, in Harris's words, many passages which were revised or deleted entirely from the final typescript.

“The Age of Kaie,” the first section of the novel, has an auto-graph note appended to it.

This note — as with other Notes appearing in *THE AGE OF THE RAINMAKERS* — raised certain problems in keeping it as succinct as possible. I wanted to imply that a re-imagination of textures of Macusi and other Amerindian legend brings into play a mythical dialogue with creatures in the air, on the land or in the water that goes deeper in intuitive terms than naturalism or naturalistic premises implies.

This intuition (for example take the “savage” bat of Makonaima) seems closer to what science has to say now about various creatures that baffled naturalists in the nineteenth century who could observe them as apparently eccentric or beautiful or repulsive or diabolic. The flight of the bat, for example, appeared decidedly eccentric and off-putting to naturalists. In vestiges of Macusi legend which survive, an intuition appears to survive which relates creatures to many in an “ultrasonic ballet” or implicit “musical gesture” [see PAGE 35 for passage which bears on this but was deleted from final typescript though it remained implicit in *THE AGE OF KAIE*].

In the same token one’s reading of the landscape as a loom or a canvas, or sculpture or icon or clock, seems inversely relevant to a re-imagination of implicit questions built into vestiges of Amerindian legend associated with the density of ‘rainmaking fabric.’ *It is for this reason, which relates to a narrative of implicit sound and gesture rather than naturalistic storyline*, that the draft shown herein (page 12 to page 37) was set down and revised as shown in final typescript (page 10 to page 15) *THE AGE OF KAIE*.⁹

Here we have the habit that necessity has inflicted on Wilson Harris. Everywhere explanation. Whether he is giving a paper at a Commonwealth Conference or breaking out of the text of some of his novels with a kind of anguished explicit commentary, or composing notes to accompany his manuscript material to the University of Texas, Wilson Harris *explains*. I don’t see this as anything other than a courtesy of clarification but there are two points to be made about these notes. First, they are Harris’s acknowledgement of a concrete reader (here, researcher?) at the receiving end of his prose, and it reminds one of an important aspect of his work: it is a very sustained *conversation* about very *concrete issues* with a profoundly tangible sense of the reader.

Secondly, this note about the Makonaima bat and the ultrasonic ballet indicates the central metaphor of the novel, its privileged origin, and its possibilities for unearthing relationships and correspondences between all aspects of existence: man, animals, earth, sky, heaven, limbo, right, wrong, good and evil, power, authority, love. The metaphor here is an image, a conceit, a conception which yields, however, an *IS* proposition about the world, as distinct from an *AS IF* proposition. This is a massively crucial and far-reaching assertion of Wilson Harris's, which in *Ascent to Omai* he worded somewhat more technically as being "a question of reconsidering the origin of function within a variety of signals and complexes."¹⁰

AS IF is the most excised form in his manuscripts:

"As if a bomb had fallen" will be corrected in favour of "A bomb may have fallen."

"he was aware of himself as a transparent target, as if this were the self-reversible siege of space . . ." becomes "he was aware of himself as a transparent target, self-reversible . . . siege of space."¹¹ This is not purely a technical problem. It is one with deep philosophical implications and would place Harris squarely against the positivism and pessimism of Hans Vaihinger's (1852-1932) philosophy of *AS/IF* [God is a fiction which we *know not* to be true in a verifiable sense but which we act on *as if* it were true].

If one were to conflate the hints and instructions from these prefatory inscriptions one would have a picture of a man who gets at his material via the play-form, who in the process of constructing framework and separate scenes is visiting the Royal Commonwealth Library or the West India Committee Library to check over material like Stedman's *Narrative* and its Blake illustrations. The Shaman, Opus Contra Naturam titles for *Ascent to Omai* show Harris grasping at separate emphases of his text for the most comprehensive description, for the *whole* in relation to which individually attended to scenes could most coherently be related. ASCENT TO OMAI as title, with three Books

- (1) Omai Chasm
- (2) Ascent
- (3) Omai

is remarkably lucid when placed over against the shifting metaphysical thematics of limbo, Theatre of Subsistence, Dance of the Immortals. Yet, in these graspings for the most economical signpost we can see Harris trying to place the new tissue of reflection that he is trying to uncover into connection with a previously established body of thinking. All of Harris's work is an attempt to *advance* on what went on before. Constant reflection, constant observation, constant reading, the inability and refusal to remain with space already opened up: that is the characteristic of Harris's work.

Each of Harris's advances work with, and operate around, a fresh intuition, a new, often "eccentric," angle on the world. Alerting the researcher to the ultrasonic gestures of the Makonaima bat as subterranean grammar is one indication of this process. It is an aspect of Harris that is quite important and it is highly visible in his pre-textual revisions.

In Harris's process of composition we discover a manner, a temperament, a very special way of being in the world: we find urgency, incoherence, sensed coherence, expressed, litanized, played (as with fishing rod) for bite, bait, bit, piece, peace.

The Mayakovsky resonances in *Ascent to Omai* give us an example of this manner.

II

We meet these lines on pages 16-17 of *Ascent to Omai* as Victor has just regained consciousness.

Beneath him lay the chasm of the river, volcanic and subdued. Above him stood the mountains of lava, worshipful and brooding, a subsidiary ridge of temperament thrusting — as he felt — towards loops of sky and bush. Topography of the heartland. With one such loop — half-slate, half-chalk of cloud — the sun appeared to vegetate, hanging in the sky. Suddenly straddled by its own vine and trousers, reformation of the loop — Victor felt himself addressed by a line from a Russian poet — art of revolution — *a cloud in trousers*. Encircling vestments of poetry — Donne to Mayakovsky.

In his earlier manuscript Harris spent a good deal of effort trying to fit Mayakovsky into *Ascent to Omai*. There are four

different versions of an attempt to use these lines from one of the most famous poems of modern Russian literature.

On the pavement
of my trampled soul
the steps of madmen
weave the prints of rude crude words.
Where cities
hang
and in the noose of cloud
the towers
crooked spires
congeal —
I go
alone to weep
that crossroads
crucify
policemen.¹²

Although he quotes his own poem, "Fetish," in this novel, Harris does not quote Mayakovsky. There are recurrent references to clouds and trousers and the word "pavement" takes a special place in Harris's technical vocabulary (pavement = soul). The loops of cloud (Harris) and the noose of cloud (Mayakovsky) have associations, but in the final text of *Ascent to Omai* Mayakovsky remains as an omen of submerged power.

In the most complete version of the rejected Mayakovsky section it is Victor who chalks this poem onto the door of Adam's factory. He does so after observing a general strike which he sees as a crucifixion play performed by the deaf and the dumb and the blind; by robot welders, busmen, and transport workers.¹³ There are placards everywhere with very Wilson Harris captions: CRUCIFIXION OF BREAD, COMEDY OF CORRUPTION, CRUCIFIXION OF CAPITAL. Victor is deaf to the picket line: it is blind to the Edenic ambitions of his suffering. Victor's chalking up of the poem is an attempt to give revolution a voice.

A shudder ran through him, birthpang. He felt he too had begun to write — to find his own voice, however strange, however bizarre.

For he knew he stood in such intimate juxtaposition to centuries of oppression, decimation of aboriginal and conquered

peoples, that he instinctively carried the psychology of the womb (as if man were woman, father, mother) like a compensating underworld of dreams, a new possibility for the theatre, the birth of a native drama. It was a dangerous chasm to bear (mirror in one's side), the voiceless past, the trampled past, the motherless past, shaman or poet (put it however one wished) as in those strange myths, half-Greek, half-primitive, where in the wake of disintegrating tribes, disintegrating civilizations, a terrifying necessity arose within the psyche of the imagination to recreate the trampled dead. . . .¹⁴

This is very much Wilson Harris thinking. Victor is the poet as revolutionary and the poem is the art and act of revolution. Wilson Harris clearly conceives of Victor as the redeemer of an utterly spoiled universe in its last days, who suffers the violations of being in this world, of being the world itself:

On the pavement
of my trampled soul
the steps of madmen
weave the prints of rude crude words.

But he sees the crucifixion of Victor as a crossroads where the Russian revolution, trade unionism, demonstrations, and the destruction of the Caribs meet.

In the manuscript account Victor becomes "a shelter . . . a bridge of generations (before it grew too late) from the living to the dead, the unborn to the living, across eros and dust . . ." ¹⁵

Suddenly, in a shift of consciousness:

He was ten years old lying on the hill of Omai. A DYING MAN OF FIFTY STUNG BY THE EYE OF THE TARANTULA, TELESCOPE OF HISTORY, WHO HAD BEGUN A PROCESS OF DISENGAGEMENT, disengagement from obsession so that one was at liberty to see him again as a child of precocious stature . . . or as an old man within the cradle whose mask had been chalked by dust, the flame and candle of youth.

So chalked, however, that he was not simply a clown of despair.

By the glimmer of his candle, crumb of illumination, a kind of rain-soaked, tear-soaked bridgehead had been constructed — a pinpoint in darkness — a dimming of the features which constituted nevertheless the glimmer of dawn, original brightening of prospects.

Perhaps he had never written the poem on the door of Adam's foundry after all and had carried it upon the mirror of his side like inviolable burning premises. Mayakovsky's pavement and others (Pushkin, Crane, Blake, Donne) — NO MAN IS AN ISLAND — exercised a profound caveat in withholding every inscription . . .¹⁶

This passage unifies the different spaces, times, themes of *Ascent to Omai* with a good deal of succinctness and some dramatic power. The narrator enters into a scene of industrial and political strife, identifies with it, surrounds it with a sympathetic and prophetic consciousness, and out of a magical, vacant space (a space of human relationship emptied of prejudice into a virginal — tabula rasa — new world) he chalks Mayakovsky's poem — Cloud in Trousers — to the door of a burned out factory. From this act he develops an enormously responsible sense of himself as undergoing a disengagement from obsession, a sense of election, of being a bridgehead and redemptive agency for all the death and evil that has beset man from the beginning of life. The psychology of the womb is the knowledge of the generative source of all things, and the birth of a native drama is the beginning again in absolute freshness of the absolute wholeness of mankind. The politics and the poetics are interwoven, and the sense of the events of our time being enacted between the either/or of Apocalypse or Genesis is very strong. The coherence and the beauty of this omitted section so movingly confirmed by the Mayakovsky poem, derives from the frame within which it finds itself. To use a Harris word: consolidation. A very powerful kind of coherence descends on Victor when various levels of explanation become available. There was such a thing as the Russian Revolution: it took place at such and such a time: it was a workers' revolution and as such it was, compared to what went before, justified. Mayakovsky was central to the pre-revolutionary, futurist period of Russian poetry, and to the post-revolutionary "conscripted" period of Russian poetry. So, in the final text we have Victor's past — his father's trial for burning down the factory; his (Victor's) shining mirrors on his father; the worker's marching, the trial caught between travesty and ritual. *Ascent to Omai*, once touched at certain points, begins to slot very quickly into place. This is often

true of other Harris novels (less true, I think, of *Palace of the Peacock* and *The Secret Ladder* where a flow of narrative event is sustained). The Mayakovsky incident shows a little of the difficulty with Harris: steps or sections of his line of thought get submerged and disperse energies and reference into the final text which perplex readers. Especially those of us who nod to fulfilment but pine and scrabble for consolidation.

There is more to the omission of the Mayakovsky section. Although the manuscript Victor is surrounded by the world and by revolution, which he then takes *into* himself, the Victor of the final text begins totally and utterly *with* himself, and with a problematic of *self* which is not only not political or social or historical, it is not psychological either. The psychology of the womb is either religion or phenomenology, and the kind of knowledge such a psychology would yield would probably be akin to what the scholastics called knowledge through connaturality.¹⁷ Victor begins his adventures in Omai Chasm as an Emersonian transparent eyeball, and the Russian revolution, Mayakovsky, burning factories, and parading workers are a long way from where he stands in eternity.

The first page of *Ascent to Omai* begins with the cosmic diffusion of whatever memory or sense of *person* Victor might, in normal circumstances, have of himself. This must be a deliberate strategem on Harris's part. To introduce Mayakovsky *directly* would have pulled Victor into visibility and function: it would, in effect, have placed the novel in a crossfire of intentionalities: those of a Russian poet of the period of revolution, being read by a Guyanese novelist in our time and being used by him. And for Harris Victor is an unraveller, a shaman, who opens up and is himself opened up.

It was as though each time he flashed the mirror he was relaying a series of ghosts that were born of his own unconscious reserves (past and future) within which lived a series of mirrors at various removes in time and eternity.¹⁸

The removes of time and eternity are of crucial importance to Harris because it is against the backdrop of pre-Creation that the real nature of the picketing workers and pavement poet Victor is revealed. In that part of the printed text which touches on a small

portion of the manuscript Cloud in Trousers section, Harris has Victor stress the Adamic dimension of father/Adam. And this Adam — who may in the generative antics of this novel become Victor — has been severely judged: “as if the sentence passed on him had been one of extinction — extinction of species — extinction of tribes.”¹⁹ We have moved from the burning of a factory, and an indictment of capitalism, to a courtroom dealing with ultimate questions. End-of-globe adventure. In the manuscript account we have, in one sense, Victor-as-Jesus meeting in the picket line the insinuations of Marx and Mayakovsky. With the emphasis on Adam as Adamic actor in the printed text Victor becomes a Marlow figure, aloof, attentive, locked into a desperate adventure of the soul. What Harris refers to again and again as an *opus contra naturam*.

Harris can be, at the top of his vision, very moving. This is how the final text handles the blindness of Victor and the deafness of the workers that one meets in the manuscript version:

As if the pickets around the factory were inherently voiceless and the fire of Eden, claustrophobic Eden, a blind for all ages.

As such — by a curious almost diabolical regression of the instinct — the total nature of things *grieved* to extend itself into a courtroom of truth — myth as well as man. . . . ”²⁰

In Wilson Harris the total nature of things does grieve with intention and extension. This is *why* “a ridge of temperament thrusts itself toward loop of sky and bush,”

why “With one such loop — half-state half chalk of cloud — the sun appeared to vegetate, hanging in the sky,”

why the sun straddled by its own vine and trousers calls up Mayakovsky’s poem.

It is a kind of surrealism. In *Black Marsden* we meet this grievance of the nature of things when Goodrich draws:

on the book of Sky and Creek he now drew and sketched himself afresh aged five. In that sketch or square he uprooted the rain, the snow, uprooted the equator, uprooted the Poles.²¹

We can see Harris, in his handling of the Mayakovsky poem, covering his tracks, disguising his steps. To decipher the earlier drafts of his work is not easy, but every now and again one has

the feeling that Harris starts off in a very consolidated universe and begins to demolish connections of character, action, and thought. With a kind of dismay, one says to oneself, Yes, there is this man Victor, who is in this chasm, who has been bitten by a tarantula, who has had this life, who has these preoccupations which fade into other preoccupations held by other men. There is nothing finally disturbing about conventions of realism and a taste for infinite regression. One would simply be in the presence of a clever, cerebral realist. One sees Wilson Harris cutting off the smoothness of narrative and causation, quite literally alienating his reader and alienating the final text from its moorings in manuscript coherence. In a perverse manner it would seem that the final text itself is alienated into existence by Harris, and until the alienating has reached a certain stage of removal Wilson Harris will still fidget with words, phrases, and ideas. Passages that have dramatic lucidity are hammered into reflective obscurity. This is somewhat reminiscent of the Old Provençal hermetic style of poetry, *trobar clus*,²² and recalls Harris's own description of the writer at the end of *Ascent to Omai*.

It was not his object to exploit his material within a monolithic cast or mould, sentiment or callous enchantment or substitute.

These exploitations were better left to intellectuals — and he was not an intellectual in any given predictable fashion or creed.

He was a creative struggler who, in the actual task of being born through words, *saw* — as upon a strange land of primordial/broken vessels — signposts he had either forgotten or had never seen before.²³

Harris does not exploit Mayakovsky, but allows the sympathetic register displaced by the Russian poet to redirect and infiltrate his own sensibility. Art of revolution covers Donne as well as Mayakovsky, but it is their words which give us the real revolution, because they give us the real revelation. As Viktor Shklovsky, the friend of Mayakovsky (and the formulator of the concept of distantiation/distancing which is useful for Harris's work) wrote in 1919, a year turbulent with revolution:

In analyzing poetic language for its phonetic and lexical structure, for its syntax and its semantics, as well as for its characteristic distribution of words, we will always encounter the same

property of the artistic: *that it is created expressly to liberate perception from automation and that the aim of the artist is the "seeing"; it is artfully created in such a way as to hold perception and bring it to its highest possible intensity and longest duration. . . .*²⁴

After retailing an anecdote about Pavlov's hostility to the word *psychology* in favour of the word reflexes, Shklovsky writes:

Once he came to the laboratory and, with a grim laugh, said: "Always reflexes and more reflexes. The time has come to invent a new term for all these reflexes, as for instance 'psychology'."

Well, we [the Opoyaz group] failed to invent such a term.

Signals, but signals of what? Actually, in the final analysis, examining all my writings on plots, we can see that art aims at restoring sensory perception.

Sensory perception of what?

And here, I began to argue that art develops on its own, *independently*.²⁵

Signals of what? Sensory perception of what? Harris's struggle with the liberation of language and thought from system and his attempt to hold perception at its highest possible intensity puts him into the business of reforming the loop of sky and bush, of clouds in trousers, of OPUS CONTRA NATURAM, against the grain of nature, CONTRA RITUAL, against the grain of how we pay homage, blindly, ceremonially, to that nature. "Innovation," says Shklovsky again, "enters art by revolution. Reality reveals itself as art in much the same way as gravity reveals itself when a ceiling collapses on its owner's head."²⁶

The gravity of *Ascent to Omai* required the literal absence and the muted dispersed presence of Mayakovsky. It did so because the gravity that always fascinates Harris is "the shape of gravity prior to the shape of birth itself."²⁷ In the cosmic and moral allegories of his fictions Harris pursues a blasphemous millennial dream:

Each step around the globe for the Fool subsisted upon unwritten reserves planted in the death of obscure men and women who were antecedent to the gods. As though the gods were born of antecedent silences, lost buried tongues that set up unfathomable necessities of unexpressed feeling upon which the idiot subsisted — which drew him *through* them into unsuspected spaces that

cried for language, the language of creation, the language of the deaf, dumb, blind fallen who lay at the bottom of the world.²⁸

Harris is a man who would empty Hell of its viciousness, Heaven of its virtue, and Creation of its blindness past, present, future. Revision is not revisionism. Harris's work is art as permanent revolution. Art of Revolution. A Cloud in Trousers. Encircling vestments of poetry — Donne to Mayakovsky — to Wilson Harris.

A number of reflections on Harris emerge from an examination of his revisions. These may be stated in the form of discrete propositions.

Harris is obsessed with deconstructing, reconstituting human relationships outside of any limiting concept of character, removed from any support from society, away from any control of model [religious, philosophical].

This must really be a *tabula rasa* venture.

It also means that one has to unfix the moorings of image from the world which keeps man and nature in such complicit and embraced harmony.

Example: Marie is in conversation with Rose in *Companions of Day and Night*, mss. Notebook A, p. 105.

As though the soul of love and gentleness and responsibility is there in me (*through me*) to be confirmed by you (*through you*) as the threshold that lies between man and man. But it falls short before passing through . . .

Hence Harris is concerned with revolution (Russian, Mexican), with historical change (Aztecs, Empire, *devolution*), with intellectual re-formation (Jung, Mayakovsky, Le Corbusier).

Consequently, we are often in a phenomenal world.

Periodically, the language of Harris becomes Biblical and the voice is that of an Evangelist (a John the Baptist figure) or Christ (suffering on the cross, with wounds, stigmata).

Example: *Companions of Day and Night*, p. 41. "And when I have vanished remember me as the captain of my soul."

Love, compassion, anger, hate, redemption: the themes are Christian, the paradoxes are religious.

It may be that the tradition of wisdom literature is appropriate for an understanding of Harris's fiction.

Harris rehearses the difficulties, the banalities of the age, and attempts to mint a new language, new concepts, for a new world.

In this sense, the New World Theme in Harris (Caribbean/America) is *typological*, not historical, a failed, foiled option, not in *that place then*, but *this place (globe) now*.

The drama of Harris is, in one sense, the drama of Eden, of mythic *place*, but it is a drama performed in the language of galaxies, of twentieth-century concepts of *space*. The organizing abstract models of architecture, painting, physics interest him. He implants them in history to bring about the implosion of that history into its original, originating capacity.

This has a strange effect — it secularizes his concerns, gives a profane language of science and the physical to issues which are normally sacred, religious. It is the mixture of two domains (sacred/secular), of two different language discourses, which causes problems in reading Harris, in visualizing his space, in comprehending his conceptual formulations.

His dramatizations do occupy a limbo land between image and idea, with ideas performing with the emotive range of images; with images being conscripted into the conceptual, intellectual terrain of ideas.

When one traces the resonance of Mayakovsky in *Ascent to Omai* one is reminded of one of the main efforts of surrealism: the attempt to get at an extra/supra-experiential domain of "truth" beyond perception and the categories which lock it into "sterility." Yet Harris would not want to accept this programme or formulation as mystical. It is a kind of ontological realism.

It is meant to yield description and *result*.

Harris sees his work as revolutionary in *conception* as well as in *form*. This is appropriate for a body of fiction the purpose of which is to re-conceive the (interpreted) shape of the world. The primary drama going on in Harris's manuscripts and visible in the final text is the attempt to mould form to conception and to do so while the antennae of sensibility are still probing the gravity and force of that conception. This is where the Makonaima bat comes in. The drama between form and content is secondary, since the "content" of history and of the consolidated fictions which cluster around it is a camouflage of illusion. Hence the

efforts on Harris's part to "alienate" the content of his fiction from its leased connection to the world outside that fiction.

Harris has an instrumental view of vision.

He is very much interested in the transvaluation of values; not via the *actions* of a superman hero but through the *mediations* of a watcher, who searches for the fundamental grammar of existence. This grammar may then be used in a transformational way to decode other, more bound, more surface-determined sets of value.

The status of this watcher is of the first importance for Harris's fictions (*ficciones*).

That status is peculiar to the extent that it needs to locate itself on a ground which must and may exist, but which, outside of the energies of the watcher, does not. The point of view, in a stable Jamesian sense, is destabilized and becomes, in the maximum richness that Harris wishes to derive from it, a point of *access*.

Harris's watchers *are* the windows *to* the infinite — hence of the infinite (transfinite or non-finite might do just as well); the emphasis is on what is shown *through* them.

The extremely difficult technical feat that Harris must then negotiate is to "paralyze," "stabilize" what, in necessity, must be a process, a procedure, a rite of passage.

The problem is solved for orthodox fictions by *firming up*, at one point, the triad of terms: watcher, watching, watched — *who* watches, *what* is watched, *how* the watching transacts itself. A privileged conception of self, of world, of language solves the aesthetic problem.

But it does so at a price. It is his obsessive concern with this *price* and with the consequences of it being unrecognized or unpaid, that distinguishes a good deal of his fiction and all of his critical articles. It also accounts for the nature and the intensity of his revisions.

The price of false firming up may be coherence, but it is the malign coherence ("robot" might be his word) of a false formation. Hence the continuing insistence that the price unpaid is the literal equivalent to Apocalypse Now.

NOTES

- ¹ Rolston Adams, "Wilson Harris the Pre-Novel Poet." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 13 (April 1979), 71.
- ² This is a formal description of the *Ascent to Omai* file.
- (i) Preliminary Typescript Version: 180 pages, dated 17/5/68.
This includes an "Appendix 2" section, pp. 49-54, included in the Faber text, p. 41 ff.
- (ii) "The Ruined Porkknocker," 161 pages, dated 16/5/68.
Designated MSS A.
- (iii) Alternative routes the novel could have taken which were abandoned, 113 pages.
Designated MSS B.
- (iv) UZA to UUL (an internal description devised by Wilson Harris), 107 pages.
Designated MSS C. Author's notation: "see pages 50-55 MSS B."
- (v) Corrected Typescript, 77 pages.
Designated MSS D.
Footnote 2 refers to MSS D, Prefatory note.
- ³ *Omai*. MSS B. Prefatory note.
- ⁴ *Omai*. Inset note (autograph) between pages 9-10 of Preliminary Typescript.
- ⁵ *Omai*. Scratch page (autograph) inserted between pages 11-12 of Preliminary Typescript. Dated 17/5/68.
- ⁶ This is a formal description of the *Companions of the Day and Night* FILE.
- (i) Clean copy of Final Typescript, pages 1-85.
Corresponds with Faber text.
- (ii) 4 Notebooks.
- (iii) Typescript: pages 1-112.
Author's note: This typescript (pages 1-82) is based on Notebooks 1-4.
N.B. Pages (typescript and autograph) have been renumbered 1-112 to accommodate same inserted drafts and pages between 1 and 82 stated above.
Footnote 6 refers to (iii), p. 1.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁸ Formal description of *Black Marsden* file.
Black Marsden/(a tabula rasa comedy)/by/Wilson Harris 1971/401 pages of rough drafts (typescripts and autograph) preceding final typescript A.
IIA. *Black Marsden*/4.4.71/First Working Draft, pages 9-10.
B. Alternative sketches, pages 344-379; 388-89 of A.
Footnote 8 refers to MSS A, p. 1.
- ⁹ Prefatory note to typescript and autograph drafts. Underlining by Wilson Harris.
- ¹⁰ Wilson Harris, *Ascent to Omai* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 45.
- ¹¹ Faber, *Omai*, p. 27; Preliminary Typescript, p. 28.
- ¹² *Omai*. Preliminary Typescript, pages 140-47. Mayakovsky wrote "A Cloud in Trousers" in 1914/15. The original title was "The Thirteenth Apostle"

and in Herbert Marshall's edition of the poems, Vladimir Vladimirovitch Mayakovsky (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), "On the Trampled Pavements" is dated 1913 and immediately precedes the Introduction to "A Cloud in Trousers." Marshall notes that this long poem "was written in Russia under the Tzarist regime, in the midst of an imperialist war, and when Mayakovsky was in his most 'Futurist' period. From that background it emerges as if it were indeed the last despairing cry of man facing the Universe naked and alone" (p. 98).

To emerge from *Ascent to Omai* and to submerge oneself in Mayakovsky is to find oneself part of a world of anxiety, language, and symbol very similar to that of Wilson Harris.

For a fuller flavour of "A Cloud in Trousers" see Wiktor Worozylski, *The Life of Mayakovsky* (New York: The Orion Press, 1970).

- 13 Harris always gives one the sense of having watched, witnessed the world. Here, although he could be referring to a demonstration in Trafalgar Square, one has the sense of the widespread strikes in Guiana in 1963 as a primary reference.
- 14 *Omai*. Preliminary Typescript. Appendix 2, pages 51-52.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
- 17 On connaturality, see Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 23. Knowledge through connaturality is classical, according to Maritain, in the Thomist school.
- "In this knowledge through union or inclination, connaturality or congeniality, the intellect is at play not alone, but together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them. It is not rational knowledge, knowledge through the conceptual, logical and discursive exercise of Reason. But it is really and genuinely knowledge, though obscure and perhaps incapable of giving account of itself, or of being translated into words."
- 18 *Omai*. Faber text, p. 46.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 20 *Omai*. *loc. cit.*
- 21 *Black Marsden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 66.
- 22 "The best of trobar clus is characterized by a parabolic quality, the result of a studied ambiguity which implies a reserve of meaning beyond the comprehension of the average intelligence. The poem communicates a feeling that more is meant than meets the eye, and what the eye meets is by no means certain. We are thus aware of penumbral significances which may or may not have been intended, as well as of a general exasperating breakdown of communication." Maurice Valency, *In Praise of Love*: quoted by Angus Fletcher in his *Allegory: the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 310.
- 23 *Omai*. Faber text, p. 123.
- 24 Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and his Circle* (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1972), p. 115.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- 27 *Companions of the Day and Night* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 19.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.