

Fenwick's Vision: Liberal Tyranny in "The Guyana Quartet"

MAC FENWICK

WHILE THE FOUR novels of Wilson Harris's *The Guyana Quartet* have all received much critical attention beyond the obvious similarities of their stylistic daring and shared imagery, very little consideration has been given to the *Quartet* as an integrated whole.¹ When we do look at the novels as part of a single work, one of the first things that we notice is a repeating and circular narrative pattern as, in each novel, characters travel into the jungle where they encounter and are transformed by the ghosts of Guyana's brutal history. This recurring narrative pattern would seem to imply that these ghosts are somehow able to transcend, and perhaps even to redeem, the violent history of colonial oppression that they represent. In this manner, the *Quartet* would at first glance appear to reify these ghosts into representations of a transhistorical or ahistorical grace. However, in the final novel of the *Quartet*, *The Secret Ladder*, the reification of oppression and suffering that underlies such a view is examined as but the most gentled form of the imperialistic desire to understand human relationships according to the bipolar terms of (ruling/interpretative) subject and (ruled/interpreted) object. Through the limited understanding of the government surveyor Fenwick, Harris is able to explore the manner in which western liberalism — and its counterpart, literary realism — participate in and even perpetuate this imperialistic desire. It is in this manner that the *Quartet* presents one of the greatest challenges to contemporary criticism, insofar as it questions the liberal biases and assumptions that lie at the heart of so many of the pedagogical and critical institutions that seek to apprehend it.

A narrative pattern of encounter and redemption informs the whole of the *Quartet*. In the course of the novels, each of the peoples and cultural groups that contributed to the genesis of Guyana

is invested with the power to transform the protagonists' journeys into quests for enlightenment and healing. In *Palace of the Peacock*, Donne's redemption begins with his encounter with the old Arawak woman whom he takes prisoner at the Mission. The latter half of Donne's journey to reclaim the labourers who have deserted his plantation is pursued in the presence of this old woman, who guides him and his crew upriver toward the protean Mariella. This woman is laden with figural meaning. She is explicitly figured as a representative of the indigenous peoples whose history and existence were very nearly erased by the colonization of Guyana: "She sat still as a bowing statue, the stillness and surrender of the American Indian of Guyana in reflective pose" (61). The woman also represents the Guyanese landscape itself: as Donne complains of the inconvenience that the desertion of his labour force has put him to, he "pointed across the wrinkled map of the Arawak woman's face in the vague direction of the Atlantic Ocean" (51). Furthermore, when the crew begin their journey beyond the jungle Mission where they have arrested her, they travel on a river that reflects and is reflected by the old woman: "Her crumpled bosom and river grew agitated with desire. . . . The ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew" (62).

Finally, the Arawak woman is representative of the protean Mariella, who is herself all women to each of the men in the crew. Donne's mistress and murderer, Mariella is also the innocent virgin who awaits them at the end of their journey in the Palace of the Peacock; Da Silva has a vision in which he sees Mariella as his wife; and in the story of his escape into the jungle after murdering his mistress and her lover, Wishrop relates how he was healed by an old Arawak woman.² As they near the end of their journey, this old woman begins the transformation of their quest from one guided by the imperialist desire for conquest, to one of understanding and redemption. It is the old woman who leads the pilot Vigilance on his visionary journey up the cliff face: "The Arawak woman pointed and Vigilance, straining his mind from the volcanic precipice where he clung, looked and saw the blue ring of Pentecostal fire in God's eye as it wheeled around him above the dreaming memory and prison of life until it melted where neither wound nor witch stood" (91). Guided by the woman, Vigilance foreshadows

the vision of the community of humanity that is vouchsafed his captain at the novel's conclusion, when Donne realizes that "the truth was they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk" (110). It is only in this final moment of union with the fleeing Arawaks that Donne is fully "healed" of his desire for power and control over the savannah.

In *The Far Journey of Oudin*, Oudin's and Beti's flight from her uncle Mohammed and the tyrannical money-lender Ram is marked by their encounters with the ghostly twins of the dead Hassan and Kaiser. These figures act as reminders of indentured East Indian labourers, as well as of the victims of neo-imperialism. The first person whom Oudin and Beti meet after crossing the river at the edge of the jungle is the old fisherman whom Mohammed has sent to find them, and who is the now-dead Hassan's twin. Instead of doing as he was bid by Mohammed, the fisherman helps Oudin and Beti to escape, explaining that he wants "to relinquish every part in murderation and death" (209). Having turned against Mohammed, the old man becomes for Oudin "an image of transparency through whom he looked across the river and into the distance, as into a timeless womb," and the basket of fish that lies beside him becomes "the first shell and hurdle and offering of repentance and sacrifice [Oudin] must accept in himself and must overcome, to be the forerunner of a new brilliancy and freedom" (210). Having begun their journey with guidance from one of Mohammed's victims, Oudin and Beti complete it as the prisoners of one of Ram's: the woodcutter who holds them captive, and whom Ram has deprived of his teaching position because of his radical politics (221), is also the twin of burned Kaiser. The Arawaks and the Caribs are represented not only by Palace's old Arawak woman, but also by the carnival-Carib ghosts of *The Whole Armour*. It is these figures from the past who give Cristo the skin of the jaguar, within which he feels as though he is "the last member, remaining behind, of the flying band. Every guilty body rolled in one. Vanquished as well as slave, rapist, Carib, monster, anything you want to think. Names give out" (345). Cristo also mistakes his own reflection for the face of an escaped African slave (341), foreshadowing the emergence of Poseidon and his people in *The Secret Ladder*.

In each case, the transformation and redemption of the traveler's journey into the jungle is initiated by his or her encounter with one or more of the peoples from within the history of Guyana. The notable, and pointed, exclusion in this pattern is the European conquerors, whose role in this history Harris explores through the dual figure of the Donne/Fenwick pairing. Neither of these characters acts as a catalyst for change and redemption in others, but is himself redeemed by his encounter with the ghostly denizens of the jungle. As Cristo comes to realise through his experiences, the white, European rulers of Guyana "are *our* problem child after all, that we're *hundreds of years* older than they dream to be. And why? Because we have begun to see ourselves in the earliest grass-roots, in the first tiny seed of spring" (333). This pattern would seem to imply that the *Quartet* as a whole is constructed around the binary division of oppressor and oppressed, with the latter term being privileged over the former. Harris's deployment of the Amerindians throughout the *Quartet*, for example, has led to at least one critic's accusation of Harris's "stereotyping" approach to the old Arawak woman of *Palace of the Peacock* (Robinson 148-55). It would appear, however, that Harris is well aware of the emblematic status that he accords the aboriginal peoples in this novel. In the narration of Wishrop's story, after Wishrop has murdered his wife and her lover and fled into the jungle, he encounters and then kills, "the inevitable Arawak woman (this was the crew's ancestral embroidery and obsession) who nursed him to life" (57). Still, this killing echoes Cristo's encounter with the Arawak medicine men in *The Whole Armour*. Despite the fact that Wishrop is a murderer who greets the aboriginal presence with the renewal of violence, while Cristo is an innocent man who comes to accept his experiences with humility, both men are granted the grace and compassion of these ghosts in equal measure. This would seem to suggest that these figures exist in the novels as the sign of an indiscriminate and even transhistorical form of redemption. *The Secret Ladder*—the final novel of the *Quartet*—counteracts this stance by suggesting how the binary division of human communities into oppressor and oppressed is a limited form of understanding human relationships created and maintained by western liberalism and its counterpart, literary realism.

Fenwick is a hydrological surveyor who has been sent by the colonial government to take measurements on the Canje River in preparation for the construction of a flood basin. While there, he uncovers a hidden community made up of the descendants of escaped slaves who are going to be displaced by the project, and his discovery complicates the already strained relations between himself and the members of his crew. The Canje folk are led by the old man Poseidon, with whom Fenwick has several meetings in his attempt to resolve the situation as the Canje folk become increasingly rebellious and even violent. What makes Fenwick unique among the characters of the *Quartet*, is that from the very beginning of his experiences, he has a profound sense of the visionary potential of his journey into the heartland:

He liked to think of all the rivers of Guyana as 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. (367)

Despite this heartfelt desire to understand, Fenwick is unable to prevent the escalating violence of the Canje folk's rebellion. Unlike Donne in *Palace of the Peacock*, he never has a visionary moment of the "sacramental distance" between self and other (101). Nor does he feel that he truly possesses and is possessed by the landscape as are Beti and Oudin in *The Far Journey of Oudin*, and Cristo in *The Whole Armour*. His final vision extends only so far as the realization that he is only at the beginning of knowledge, and that in order to achieve understanding he must begin his journey again. What is more significant — and all too frequently ignored — is that his story ends with the death of Poseidon and the destruction of the Canje community.

Despite his inability to avert disaster, Fenwick has received surprisingly sympathetic treatment from the novel's critics. Most critical treatments gloss over or brush aside entirely the destruction of the Canje community and concentrate instead upon Fenwick's presumed "moral victory." Gregory Shaw sees Fenwick's seven day quest for "de-creation" as an instance of the Romantic ideal of the imagination triumphant over "the tyranny of visible forms" (149). Hena Maes-Jelinek claims that Fenwick "not only grasps the full meaning of his country's past but realises that such understanding

can give rise to a genuinely new conception of man and society" (*Naked 9*). Michael Gilkes sees Fenwick's final stance as the achievement of a narrating voice that is "an instrument and voice for a Universal Intelligence, and his art reflects both an Orphic and Promethean quest [for authentic Being]" (94). This uniformly-positive reaction to Fenwick is perhaps explained, at least in part, by the automatic sympathy felt by western-liberal critics and readers for one of their own: a liberal intellectual (frequently taken as an autobiographical representation of the author), attempting to understand a society and a culture alien to his usual experience. For most critics, Fenwick's liberal agenda is a laudable one and his failure to forge an understanding with Poseidon is simply the tragic result of circumstances that are beyond his control. The concrete effects of Fenwick's project are ignored and he becomes a kind of liberal hero, unable to avert disaster, but at least feeling deeply about it.

Such a stance as this amounts to an unreflective valorization of liberalism. It ignores Harris's own warning that "to attempt to arrive at another absolute theory, another absolute description . . . is to succumb to further fallacy and apparently incorrigible tragedy" ("Imagination" 194-95). By citing the supposed impossibility of Fenwick's situation — the "*apparently* incorrigible tragedy" — in their defense of Fenwick's role in the destruction of the Canje folk, these critics "succumb to the fallacy" of making Fenwick's (and presumably their own) liberalism an "absolute theory." It is to ignore the possibility that what dooms the Canje community is not only historical necessity, but also Fenwick's inability to transcend the liberal-realist interpretation of his relationship to Poseidon according to the binary logic of (ruling/interpretative) subject and (ruled/interpreted) object.

Harris's wariness of liberal thought is apparent in his response to Achebe's now-infamous attack on *Heart of Darkness* in which Achebe calls Conrad "a bloody racist," and argues that the novella is wholly unredeemable of the racist attitudes that motivate both it and the critical work done on it. Harris argues that there is a redemptive value in the work's presentation of liberalism, insofar as it allows us to see how — through the parodic undercutting of Kurtz's liberal manifesto by his scrawled postscript to "exterminate

all the brutes"—“there is a dignity in liberal pretensions until liberalism, whether black or white, un.masks itself to reveal inordinate ambitions for power where one least suspects it to exist” (“Frontier” 135). According to Harris, Conrad’s intuitive imagination brings him to the frontier of a new and parodic vision with(in) which to contest the biases of liberal thought, without actually being able to “cross” that frontier. The reason for this failure is Conrad’s dependence upon the novel-form that he inherited, which, Harris argues, “was conditioned by a homogeneous cultural logic to promote a governing principle that would sustain all parties, all characterization, in endeavouring to identify natural justice, natural conscience behind the activity of a culture” (135). Fenwick reacts to the dilemma that he confronts upon the Canje River by searching for such a “natural justice” or “natural conscience” with which to regulate or order his relationship with Poseidon, at the expense of regarding the particular and specific cultural activity of Poseidon and the people whom the old man represents. In this respect, Fenwick’s attempts to understand Poseidon lead to the kind of “ego-fixation” that Harris describes in this paper as proceeding from “the logic of man-made symmetry or absolute control of diversity, the logic of benign or liberal order” (136). It is the liberal desire for order and symmetry within human relations, and within the institutions that regulate these relations, that covers over the radically intuitive “creativity and dialogue with others through and beyond institutions” (136) that escapes Fenwick throughout.

In *The Womb of Space*, Harris pursues his formulation of liberalism as subsisting upon the subject-object divide, arguing that:

within the hubris of the sovereign strait-jacket that has long dominated imperial civilisation, we lack a profound, cross-cultural anthropology of imaginative acts, myth, culture, science through which to break the insensibility of “object-function” that regiments (or divides) intelligence and creativity until a distinction between the two is virtually lacking. (114)

The subject-object split upon which liberalism depends, and that Harris argues Conrad’s novella dramatizes, is here configured as regimenting the distinction between “intelligence and creativity.” Rather than acknowledging the radically disruptive ability of

creativity to bring to light the “profound, cross-cultural” nature of existence, the “sovereign strait-jacket” of liberalism renders the relationship of creativity and intelligence according to the terms of ruler/ruled, thus domesticating creativity and making it the servant or slave of intelligence. Western liberalism — the base and well-spring of what Harris here calls “Imperial civilisation” — is thus willingly blind to the kind of realizations that would shake its certainties. Harris argues that it is Conrad’s inability to “cross” this frontier that demonstrates how liberalism is no antidote to the desire for tyrannical control and is, in fact, part of the same binary logic of victim and victimizer as is imperial tyranny. When we read *Ladder* from the perspective of Harris’s critique of liberalism, it is easy to see how Fenwick perceives the world according to the bipolar logic of “good guys and bad guys, racist guys and liberal guys,” established and maintained by what Harris identifies as liberalism’s partner and bastion, literary realism (“Frontier” 135).

Harris argues that literary realism, the birth of which coincided and co-operated with the consolidation of class and vested interest in Europe,

rests more or less on the self-sufficient individual — on elements of “persuasion” . . . rather than “dialogue” or “dialectic” . . . The novel of persuasion rests on grounds of apparent common sense. . . . The tension which emerges is the tension of individuals — great or small — on an accepted plane of society we are persuaded has an inevitable existence. There is an element of freedom in this method nevertheless, an apparent range of choices, but I believe myself that this freedom — in the convention which distinguishes it, however liberal this may appear — is an illusion. (*Tradition* 29)

Realism is explicitly connected in this passage to (western) liberalism and to the ruling classes’ attempts to normalize not only the western self but also the social structures that support it. Stephen Slemon has argued that Harris criticizes realism as being intimately bound up with what Slemon calls the “dream of imperialism,” by which he means those attempts by colonizing states and individuals to normalize the western self and western social structures as the only “real” ones (Slemon 74-75). Slemon has argued that Harris’s aesthetic opens a space between the positivism of twentieth-century Anglo-American realism, which denies the role

of imagination in constructing (postcolonial) reality, and the skepticism of postmodernism, which claims imagination is wholly responsible for creating reality. Slemmon concludes that Harris's novels "negotiate" in this manner between authoritarian truth-claims and nihilism (72-78). For Harris, to contest the normalizing claims of imperialism is to contest the normalizing reality-claims of literary realism, and vice versa: "The imperium is the fountainhead of colonialism, it is governed by extreme ideology or by extreme materialism, its bastion is realism [sic]" ("On the Beach" 335). *The Secret Ladder* demonstrates how even in its most gentled and liberal form, the "realistic" insistence on the absolute-subject/absolute-object split participates in the imperialistic desire to understand the world in the bipolar terms of ruler and ruled, oppressor and oppressed. As Harris explains in "The Frontier on which *Heart of Darkness Stands*," "the liberal homogeneity of a culture becomes the readymade cornerstone upon which to construct an order of conquest" (136).

It is this appeal by liberalism to the "realistic" ideal of the self-sufficient character and absolute self that hampers Fenwick. He remains throughout the narrative committed to the liberal ideals of rational "man-to-man" communication, and to the necessity of hierarchical models of authority based on (imperious) notions of individual responsibility. Fenwick thus interprets Poseidon — according to the terms of both western liberalism and literary realism — as an absolute object, with Fenwick himself acting as the absolute (liberal/rational) interpretative subject. Critics who see Fenwick as a liberal hero mimic this perceptual error. When, in an interview with Michael Fabre, Harris is asked about the first meeting between Poseidon and Fenwick, he does not mirror his critics by concentrating on what Fenwick thinks of, or tries to discover in, the meeting (in fact, Fabre has to prompt Harris to talk about Fenwick). He concentrates instead on what Poseidon sees: "He sees [Fenwick and Bryant] clearly but he does not see the boat: they are standing on the water. You realise that image more profoundly only if you realise what water means to Poseidon" (3-4).³ Instead of exploring the perspective of the liberal intellectual coming face to face with the enigmatic sign of his own liberal guilt, Harris places himself fully within the perspective offered by the other

looking back from within a hybrid history of conquest and suffering. Having adopted Poseidon's view of Fenwick, Harris claims that the surveyor "is a tyrant . . . [and] is moved deeply when he [Fenwick] realises this" (3-4). Fenwick's tyranny is his own paternalistic desire to take responsibility both for those over whom he has been given authority (his crew), and those whom he has metaphorized into absolute objects and idols of suffering (Poseidon).

Fenwick's first perceptions of Poseidon are as a symbolic object seen through the web of rumour and legend:

He had occasionally glimpsed an ancient presence passing on the river before his camp but had never properly seen it or actually addressed it. Rumour had created a tortuous and labyrinthine genealogy for Poseidon, the oldest inhabitant of the Canje. His grandfather had been a runaway African slave who had succeeded in evading capture and had turned into a wild cannibal man in the swamps. . . . Now everyone saw him as the black king of history whose sovereignty over the past was a fluid crown of possession and dispossession. (369)

Fenwick's perception of Poseidon as "the black king of history" has the effect of distancing the two men, by interpreting their relationship from within the confines of a model that stresses the hierarchical ordering of absolute selves. As Harris explains: "Fenwick was not able . . . to see him clearly: Poseidon was not a transparency; he had written in to him a combination of animal motifs, related in part to the annunciation of humanity" (Fabre 6). Even as he realises the importance of this old man — whose voice is never actually recorded in the novel (like the old Arawak woman's in *Palace of the Peacock*) — Fenwick finds conversation with him a "bewildering dichotomy." Despite his keen awareness of his "ignorance" and "failure of comprehension," Fenwick remains unable to understand what it is about "the apparition of Poseidon" that so "moved and disturbed" him (373). Fenwick's failed understanding of the old man is thrown into high relief by Bryant's success. Poseidon finds "a ready natural ear in Bryant" (371), who, contrary to Fenwick's view of the old man as an "ancient presence" or a "king," regards him as his own grandfather (375). Bryant's relationship with Poseidon is the intuitive understanding of descendant and ancestor: a fact emphasized by their both feeling as though they have known one another before (376). Whereas Fenwick's perceptions of Poseidon

characterize the old man as a thing in need of interpretation — Fenwick is upset that he “had never properly seen *it* or actually addressed *it*” (see above) — Bryant sympathizes with the old man’s plight (375, 397). Bryant seeks only a recognition of their common ancestry: “I want him to accept me like a lost son” (398).

Fenwick’s interpretation of his relationship with Poseidon emerges most clearly in the letter to his mother. In this letter, Fenwick explains that “I have come across the Grand Old Man of our history, my father’s history in particular (I doubt very much whether you would care for him now. He has fallen into strange ways.)” Instead of seeing in this figure an image of his grandfather (“my father’s history”) — as does Bryant — Fenwick immediately gives him an upper-case title and endows the old man with an iconic status. He goes on to say, “I wish I could truly grasp the importance of this meeting. If I do not — if my generation do not — leviathan will swallow us all. It isn’t a question of fear — it’s a question of going in unashamed to come out of the womb again” (384). Fenwick is not an abusive tyrant like Donne. He is a well-intentioned man who earnestly desires to do what is best for everyone involved: “To *misconceive* the African, I believe, if I may use such an expression as *misconceive*, at this stage, is to misunderstand and exploit him mercilessly and oneself as well” (385). Fenwick is excruciatingly close to Donne’s vision atop the waterfall. He understands the connection between failed understanding and exploitation, not only of the other, but also of the self. However, the only way that Fenwick attempts to understand Poseidon’s rebellion is within the context of the supposedly larger political concerns of Guyana (384-85). By attempting to interpret what Poseidon and the rebellion “mean” in this manner, Fenwick approaches the old man as an icon of history (“the Grand Old Man of our history”) rather than as an ancestor. This idolization of Poseidon is the inevitable result of Fenwick’s commitment to the liberal, rationalized model of authority that he wields over his men — and that the colonial regime wields over Guyana.

Fenwick’s view of authority, and of how it works and is maintained, blinds him to the possibility of any kind of relationship with Poseidon other than the one established by the liberal-rational norms to which he is accustomed. Bryant tries to make Fenwick

understand the kind of intuitive bond that Poseidon and he share, but Fenwick just cannot see it:

“What you say is utter nonsense,” [Fenwick] cried. “You shout of freedom but with every word you ignore the inescapable problem of authority. And without understanding the depth of authority you can’t begin to understand the depth of freedom. I want to tell you again — as I tried to tell you yesterday — that I know, as well as you do, we’ve all been punishing and exploiting him,” he pointed at Poseidon, “exploiting him, robbing him.” (396)

In this exchange, Fenwick never addresses a word to Poseidon, but instead points to him as to a sign of his liberal guilt for the imperialistic past of which his government service is a continuation. Shocked by “the inadequacy of words, the sententious politics, the conceit, the cliché” Fenwick falls silent and begins a silent monologue on the nature of “the depth of authority”:

“Yes, I confess I owe allegiance to him because of his condition, allegiance of an important kind, that of conscience, of the rebirth of humanity. . . . 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! . . .

“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 . . .” (396-97)

The possibility of mutuality between Poseidon and himself does not apparently occur to Fenwick. Instead, the only new relationship that he can imagine forging with the old man is one in which their roles are reversed and Fenwick becomes “less than he is” and even “enslaved.” He sees their relationship as one that is governed and defined by the relation of “symbol” to “idol,” in which one of them must, necessarily, remain within the “trapped condition” of a “worshipper.” Fenwick’s liberal model of authority, as Harris writes, “polarizes the world dreadfully” into “oppressor and oppressed.” Fenwick has so naturalized this model that he is, as Harris puts it in another context, “no longer in a position to understand who the

oppressor is, how he relates to one, who the oppressed is, how the oppressed relates to one" ("Literacy" 25-26). In other words, Fenwick is so dedicated to understanding himself and Poseidon as oppressor and oppressed, ruler and ruled, that he cannot conceive of their relationship in any other, newer way — all they can do is change places within an immutably hierarchical structure. Bryant, the nominal "grandson" feels only sympathy with and love for Poseidon: "Poor old devil! He don't really understand what you stand for at all" (397). He is thus able to enter into the kind of intuitive apprehension of self and other that characterizes Donne's final, and essentially anti-realistic, vision of the Palace of the Peacock. Fenwick, married to his own cultural biases and constructions of authority, is unable to move beyond the "Plain wholesome understanding of history and facts and possibilities" that divide them. In a very real sense, Fenwick's perceptions of Poseidon occupy the same "frontier" space as does Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which the only way Africa and Europe can meet is amid the horror of Kurtz's wounded psyche.

Like Conrad's text, Fenwick remains unable to move beyond these biases, locked instead within the bipolar terms of the liberal dilemma. Finding Bryant of no use in "dealing" with Poseidon and the growing rebellion, Fenwick turns to his servant Jordan. The issue of his own authority and responsibility is of consuming importance to Fenwick, and how best to maintain his control over the crew is the primary topic of conversation between himself and his servant. Jordan cautions Fenwick against showing too much "sympathy" to his men — who are beginning to sympathize with the Canje folk — instead advocating a stern hand and the maintenance of strict "control" (422-25). In the end, Jordan suggests sending for the police to put down the rebellion (426). Fenwick, horrified by the idea, instead decides to "reason" with the people of the Canje, claiming that, "Once they follow precisely the nature of what's happening they'll turn reasonable" (431). Within the space of these few short pages, Harris expertly dramatizes the dual nature of liberal authority: appeals to a "universal" reason, backed by the ever-present thought and threat of coercive force. At the end of his conversation with Jordan, Fenwick decides that he wants to talk to the members of his crew "man to man" (431), hoping

that this kind of meeting will restore his authority without having to resort to openly authoritarian, and even violent, tactics.

In an interview with Slemon, Harris takes up the topic of "genuine authority." Linking authority and authoriality, Harris explains that

There can be no genuine authority, no mutual authority, without visualising the capacity of *inner space* to relate to motifs of landscape/sea-scape/sky-scape etc. (*outer space*) in such a way that a transformation begins to occur in an apparently incorrigible divide between "object" and "subject." (47)

The kind of "genuine authority" that Harris here describes arises at several points throughout the *Quartet*, most notably in Donne's final vision atop the waterfall. In this moment, the divide between self and other, Donne and the landscape ("inner space to motifs of landscape/sea-scape/sky-scape") is dissolved within and by the dreaming, anti-realistic language of the narrator. In *The Secret Ladder*, however, Fenwick's inability to forsake the liberal ideal of the absolute self blinds him to the kind of radical understanding achieved by Donne in *Palace of the Peacock*.

Michael Gilkes describes *Palace of the Peacock* as "an inner quest for wholeness . . . a Grail-quest or *bildungsroman*" (43), and most critics have, like Gilkes, interpreted Donne's terminal vision atop the waterfall as a metaphorical moment of intense self-fulfillment, and as the successful achievement of the quest for a unified self.⁴ The conclusion of Donne's journey is not, however, characterized by the unity of personal fulfillment, but by fragmentation and loss. Having suffered in his journey the catastrophic loss of his crew, Donne comes face to face with the "nothingness" that is "the ruling function of hell" (101). Donne's perception of the nothingness or hell of his "false sense of home" leads, ultimately, to an interpretation of the nothingness of the self: "Donne knew he was truly blind now at last. He saw nothing. . . . He trembled as he saw himself inwardly melting into nothingness and into the body of his death." This interpretation of his own nothingness is what leads to understanding:

it was the unflinching clarity with which he looked into himself and saw that all his life he had loved no one but himself. . . . He had entered the endless void of himself. . . . It was his blindness that made him see his own nothingness and imagination constructed beyond his reach. (107-08)

Through this realization, he comes to a full sense of the “distance” that lies between self and other, and of the (re)generative potentialities that reside within, not the individual’s own (re)constituted wholeness, but within the imaginatively-conceived possibility of entering into and embracing the dialogic space between self and other, subject and object. Donne does not find himself in the Palace, but in what Ian Adam calls “the privileged [dreaming] voice of the narrator” which itself “partakes of the voiceless dreaming of the folk” (94, 96-97). What Donne achieves is thus the dialogic language of the intuitive imagination.

The ideal of the absolute self is here replaced by a different vision of the individual — the individual who negates individuality and the self who denies selfishness, through an acceptance of the dialogue and differences that exist between subject and object. Whatever sense of wholeness that can be said to exist at the conclusion of *Palace of the Peacock* is explicitly not centred upon the individual, but upon “the one muse and one undying soul” that unites humanity: “One was what I am in the music — buoyed and supported above dreams by the undivided soul and anima in the universe from whom the word of dance and creation first came” (116). Victor J. Ramraj has argued that at the conclusion of his journey, Donne becomes the narrator-artist of the novel, and that he “comes to realise that as an artist he must accept that he is the sum total of all the diverse antithetical experiences and impulses that co-exist tensely but creatively in his psyche” (47). In this respect, Donne takes up the role, not just of the artist, but of the anti-realistic West Indian artist.

For Harris, realism finds its antithesis in West Indian art. Unlike the apparently homogenous cultures and societies in wealthy Euro-American nations, the heterogeneity of, and tensions within, the historical genesis of West Indian culture(s) remains readily apparent. Harris claims that because of these tensions, instead of “the self-sufficient character” promulgated by realism, West Indian art concerns itself with “the fulfilment of character” by exploring the “subtle links, the series of subtle and nebulous links which are latent within [the West Indian individual], the latent ground of old and new personalities” (*Tradition* 28).⁵ It is precisely these sorts of “nebulous links” that arise in the concluding vision of *Palace of the*

Peacock, and that come, finally, to redeem Donne's quest for control. Harris argues that instead of consolidating an illusory totality of character and self within a realistic narrative, West Indian artists — as inherently cross-cultural beings — attempt to interpret in their art the hybrid and dialogic nature of West Indian reality. He goes on to claim that in the realist novel, to question the monolithic totality of the self-sufficient individual is to question the "inevitable existence" or "apparent common sense" of the society that gives the "consolidated" character meaning. Harris believes that Euro-American realists are blinded to the hybridity of their culture(s) by the apparent permanence of their societies: "In the prosperous and comparatively stable societies of the West — insulated from world poverty and hunger — there is bound to be a self-defensive plastering over [of catastrophic change by] the middle-of-the-road hero who begins to bask in his classless Utopia and to look for comic scapegoats which will relieve him of a deeper theme of responsibility" (*Explorations* 16). Harris also decries (writing, prophetically, in 1981) "the best-seller obsession in consumer societies" that "hand in hand with the inflation that threatens minority arts may so determine and deaden taste that it becomes an unwitting authoritarian parallel to political monoliths in other so-called socialist areas of the world" (*Explorations* 113). By turning his back on literary realism, Harris turns his back upon imperialism, neo-imperialism, and global capitalism, as well as upon authoritarian western-popular taste and the endless play of what he calls a "a postmodernism that is bereft of depth or of an appreciation of the life of the intuitive imagination" ("Fabric" 186).

The transformation of Donne into an anti-realistic West Indian artist-narrator is begun in the middle section of *Palace of the Peacock* as he and his crew proceed upriver beyond the Mission. This section of the novel centers on the changing relationship between the riverboat's crew and the old Arawak woman whom they have taken prisoner (48). As the (simultaneous) representative of the Arawaks, the landscape, and of Mariella (see above 1-2) the old woman would seem to be an over-determined metaphor for the oppressed landscape and peoples of Guyana. But to interpret the old woman in this manner is to ignore both the mode in which she operates throughout this middle section of the novel, as well as the

effect that she has on the crew by the end of it. The crew begins its journey with her by interpreting her in the ways that I have described. Just as they seek to possess the land and to rule the people, so too have they arrested this woman whom they interpret as the representation of both. Their metaphorization of her enables the illusion that they are in control of what she represents, and that they can possess that which she signifies. However, as they proceed upriver, Donne and the crew enter “the grip of the straits of memory,” wherein they are “transformed by the awesome spectacle of a voiceless soundless motion” that the river and the woman, reflecting one another, offer them. Instead of metaphorically representing the peoples and landscape that they wish to rule, the old woman begins in this section to refer the crew’s attention to the socio-historical context which they share with the indigenous peoples: “They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued all together, and they knew that they would perish if they dreamed to turn back” (62). From an “arrested” metaphor for the suffering “Other,” she becomes a metonym of the colonial history that both “pursuer and pursued” share.⁶ Instead of defeated acquiescence, or even defiance, the old woman presents an image of the “labour and sweat” of a people whose “true manner” is “an unearthly pointlessness” that allows for “the negation of every threat of conquest and of fear — every shade of persecution wherein was drawn and mingled the pursued and the pursuer alike, separate and yet one and the same person” (61-62). Eventually, of course, she escapes their attempts to imprison her altogether as she disappears into Vigilance’s dreaming ascent of the cliff-face. The old woman has removed herself from the bipolar opposition of oppressor and oppressed, and the escape that she offers Donne at the waterfall is made through the “mingling” of the two sides of the linear-historical conflict between “pursuer and pursued.” It is this “mingling” of identity that proves anathema to Fenwick’s understanding. This failure of imagination is dramatised within *The Secret Ladder* by an incident that is the antithetical rehearsal of Donne’s transformation atop the waterfall.

Chiung, who had earlier borrowed Fenwick’s hat and coat, is attacked by two Canje men for his attempted theft of their food,

rehearsing both what Fenwick's research threatens to do to their community, and their subsequent rebellion. When Fenwick stumbles across the apparently lifeless image of himself on the stelling he reacts with horror at the sight: "It could be me lying here," Fenwick thought. . . . He wanted to dissociate himself from every vestige and ordination of self-parody, divine and human resemblances and conceits, every reminder of his own image. . . . He wanted to flee from the image of himself" (434). As Fenwick stands over his subordinate, horrified by the sight of his own double, Chiung awakens to the kind of understanding that Donne achieves atop the waterfall: "[Chiung] sounded as if he had changed places with his listeners and could see the shadow of himself (born with death) created in the dark pool of their eyes and striving to be understood" (443). Fenwick's rejection of his own doubling is his rejection of what Donne at the end of *Palace of the Peacock* finally comes to accept: those "subtle and nebulous links which are latent within" the West Indian artist, and that provide him with the imaginative capacity to construct a new vision of the human community and of his place within it. Whereas Donne accepts, and comes to be redeemed by, the dialogic nature of identity, Fenwick desires only to "dissociate" himself from the image of his own double. In fleeing "the image of himself" presented by his subordinate, Fenwick seeks to reaffirm the logic of the binary division between self and other, (ruling) subject and (ruled) object, enacted and supported by their hierarchical relationship.

What is more, Fenwick's moment of failed understanding on the stelling is the impetus for the final defeat of any hope that he and Poseidon might find a way to avoid the catastrophic destruction of the Canje community. When "the wild twins who had haunted Chiung and Fenwick and the crew that very night" (461) return to their camp, they mistakenly tell the Canje men that they have killed Fenwick, and they all flee in terror of the police. Poseidon himself has been accidentally killed during their absence by his nominal-grandson Bryant, thus making completely impossible any understanding between Fenwick (the government agent) and Poseidon (the representative of the Canje people). With the loss of their leader, and in despair of the retribution that they fear for Fenwick's supposed murder, the people of the Canje "turn

sensible" and "yield all their holdings and moveable possessions to be vested in the state or in the grave" (463).

Fenwick's failure of understanding is the result of his adherence to the liberal ideals of rational "man-to-man" communication, and to the necessity of hierarchical models of authority based on (imperial) notions of individual responsibility. Fenwick's liberal-realist interpretation of his relationship with Poseidon — as the relation of an absolute oppressive/interpreting subject, to an absolute, oppressed/interpreted object — leaves him unable to think of Poseidon in any way other than as a rival authority figure. Poseidon is either someone to defeat (with reason of course) or someone to be defeated by. The possibility of mutuality or dialogue with Poseidon, through a dissolution of subject and object within the buried history that they both share — such as Donne achieves at the conclusion of his journey — just does not occur to Fenwick. Throughout, Poseidon remains an enigmatic riddle to Fenwick: a metaphorical image in need of interpretation, and an iconic, fetishized goal to be achieved. Fenwick's failure is, quite simply, a failure of the imagination.

The novel, and thus *The Guyana Quartet*, however, does not end on a despairing note. For even as the Canje folk forsake their claims to the land, Catalena Perez and Bryant have begun a journey into the heartland that is comparable to the journeys of Cristo and Sharon in *The Whole Armour*, and Oudin and Beti in *The Far Journey of Oudin*. After Poseidon has been killed, the Canje folk put Bryant and Catalena on trial for the death of their leader. What saves Catalena from rape and murder is, ironically, Fenwick's failed moment of transformation, for it is the return of the "wild twins" that interrupts their plans. Because Fenwick has loaned his hat and coat to Chiung, the men panic and scatter in the belief that they have killed the surveyor and not one of his workers. Thanks to Fenwick's small act of kindness, Bryant and Catalena are able to escape into the jungle, where, "Fenwick grew to believe they had put their foot and escaped upon another rung in the secret ladder. The land was the mystery in which he would never chart where they had vanished . . ." (463). At the conclusion of the novel, Fenwick finally realises that he is currently incapable of understanding that journey, or of following them into the jungle.

The *Quartet* as a whole is a stylistically- and imaginatively-educative journey away from realism and liberalism, and toward a newer, more radical and more intuitive kind of creative imagination and art. The *Quartet* therefore presents a difficult challenge to anyone who approaches it with an eye toward uncovering or formulating its meaning within the liberal biases of linear plot- and character-development. The circular nature of the whole, with a conclusion that explicitly looks back to the beginning, demands a correspondingly circular and processional interpretative strategy. *The Secret Ladder* concludes with Fenwick's awakening on the seventh day and the rising of the sun, with the refrain of his dream echoing in his mind: "in the end . . . the end . . . is our beginning" (464). We are directed to return to the very beginning of the *Quartet*, and to that other sunrise during which Donne is shot and killed by Mariella thus beginning the long journey of the *Quartet* as a whole. *The Secret Ladder* demonstrates the dangers inherent to the subject-object split within Western liberalism, insofar as the hierarchical natures of authority between absolute selves, as well as literary realism's insistence on the self-sufficient individual, both prove to be deterrents to true understanding.

At the same time, however, it is important to remember that liberalism also carries with it Fenwick's good intentions. In place of the desire to rule and overpower, which motivates Donne to undertake his journey, Fenwick desires understanding and communication. To take as an absolute position the novel's critique of liberalism is to ignore what differentiates Fenwick from Donne, and to deny the circularity of the *Quartet*. It is to reify a radical anti-liberalism, when it is just such an anti-liberal stance that motivates Donne to undertake his violent quest for possession at the beginning of *Palace of the Peacock*. To reify Donne's terminal vision as an image of the individual's ability to transcend a hybrid past and reality with a new vision of wholeness is to ignore his own apprehension of his-self's nothingness. To reify Fenwick as an image of liberalism's absolute failure is to deny the good intentions and high ideals that he represents and that save Catalena Perez and Bryant. It is only by accepting both of these representations — in all of their apparent contradictions, oppositions and irresolutions — that we will be able to appropriate the perspective of the

Guyana Quartet in such a way that we can interpret it without reifying any one portion of it into an absolutist position.

NOTES

- 1 In *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel*, Michael Gilkes examines the four novels of the *Quartet* as variations on the theme of the "alchemical quest for wholeness" (28-94); Hena Maes-Jelinek also provides a novel-by-novel analysis of the *Quartet* but makes no attempt to link the four novels beyond pointing out the shared imagery (Harris 3-51); Mark McWatt examines the role of women in the *Quartet* (31-44); finally, W.J. Howard examines the *Quartet* as a work dedicated to revealing that Guyana is not historyless but as possessing "a history . . . of timeless moments" (60).
- 2 The multifaceted and ever-changing nature and identity of Mariella has been remarked upon extensively elsewhere, most fully in Maes-Jelinek, *The Naked Design* 34-36.
- 3 Fenwick's insistence upon seeing Poseidon as a representative of a "pure" African heritage is made the more remarkable given the cross-cultural possibilities opened by his very name. As the sea-god of Greek myth, Poseidon is the god of memory and of the buried past: he frequently returns to consciousness things that people have tried to forget, and he punishes those who forget their ancestral duties.
- 4 Sandra Drake interprets Donne's journey as "the attempt to find love and self-fulfillment" (49); Hena Maes-Jelinek characterizes all of Harris's novels as "successive stages in one unfinished quest" that achieves "a very momentary apotheosis . . . in *Palace of the Peacock*" ("Universal Imagination" 449). She elsewhere calls *Palace of the Peacock* "a dynamic quest for wholeness" in which the crew are representative of Donne's "inner territory, and it is from the recognition and gradual integration of those inner selves in the individual consciousness of Donne that the novel draws its significance" (Naked 11). Victor J. Ramraj calls *Palace of the Peacock*, "an allegorical bildungsroman" (47). Jack Ross goes so far as to place *Palace of the Peacock* among other traditional South American "quest novels" (455). Barbara J. Webb claims that *Palace of the Peacock*'s "search for cultural and personal identity . . . is symbolically expressed in the quest motif of the legend of El Dorado" (61).
- 5 It is important to note that according to Harris, this imaginative mode is not isolated to the West Indies. In "Interior of the Novel" (*Explorations*), he makes a similar argument about African masks.
- 6 There is far more that could be said on the topic of the relationship between metaphor and metonymy within, not only Harris's depiction of the old Arawak woman in *Palace of the Peacock*, but in the *Quartet* as a whole. (I am in the process of undertaking just such an examination of this relationship.) For two excellent discussions of the relation of metaphor and metonymy within postcolonial texts, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (51-59), and Homi K. Bhabha "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism."

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