

The Sun Within: New Solar Myth in Early Novels of Wilson Harris and J.G. Ballard

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Abstract. Even in our disenchanted age, the Sun remains a potent symbol in mythopoeic literature, and, in very different ways, Wilson Harris and J. G. Ballard each use internalised images of the Sun to construct and narrate their modern mythical landscapes. In Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), the Sun fills the pages with a nebulous and ineffable blinding power. In Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), the dual image of the physical and the psychological Sun inspires an atavistic pilgrimage. This chapter studies the role of the Sun in each novel, where it serves to inspire a quest for a form of individuation. I argue that Ballard's Sun is a transcendental engine that drives individual psychic integration, while Harris's is a gateway into a metaphysical realm of spiritual unity. In each case, the Sun is the focus of a modern mythological method.

The mythic force of the Sun has not diminished, even if today it is hard to perceive. At the turn of the 1960s, two novels depicted the Sun as a potent symbol for new, contemporary mythologies: *Palace of the Peacock* by Wilson Harris (1960), and *The Drowned World* by J. G. Ballard (1962). Despite the apparent differences between the authors in question, both Sun-stricken novels are united in their use of myth, of psychological ideas, and of the Sun as an active presence. The novels demonstrate how our star – alongside its material presence – retains a spiritual power in human life, well into our apparently disenchanted, rational age.¹ This chapter considers

¹ For their lively discussion of early versions of this chapter and related material, I am grateful the audience at *The Talking Sky* conference (Bath, 2017) and the *Myth and Emotions* conference (Madrid, 2016), and to the attendees of the Myth

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the role of the Sun in each novel in turn, leading to a conclusion which argues that the Sun becomes the lens through which the visionary experience is activated.

The political, social, and intellectual ideology of twentieth century Europe is, in Max Weber's model, disenchanted: at the dawn of that century, Weber diagnosed 'the elimination of magic from the world', (*Entzauberung der Welt*).² The steady intensification of Enlightenment since the sixteenth century saw scientific empiricism enshrined as the guiding principle – for mainstream cultural discourse, at least. There remain, however, pockets of esotericism, religion, spirituality, occultism, and superstition amidst the rationalist hegemony, which can find expression in fiction and poetry.³

The literary symbolism of the Sun in the first half of the twentieth century can be ambivalent, although it is often allied with creativity and inspiration. Two examples from modernist poetics can illustrate this. For W. B. Yeats, the arts embody a union of the 'individual kingly' Sun and the communal moon.⁴ In his verse, the Sun is frequently setting, or observed, as in 'The Tower' (1925), where the Sun is eclipsed as the poet's attentions are misdirected.⁵ The poem's references to blind poets build on a continuum of referents to Sunlight, its lack, blindness, and inspiration, which can be both positive and melancholy. For Wallace Stevens, the Sun is frequently a more present creative symbol. Northrop Frye describes Stevens's Sun as,

the hero of nature who lives in heaven but transforms the earth
from his mountain-top, "the strong man vaguely seen." As
"we are men of Sun," our creative life is his, hence the feeling

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² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1905], trans. Talcott Parsons (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp.61, 178 n.19.

³ This is argued from an astrological perspective in Bernadette Brady, *Cosmos, Chaosmos and Astrology: Rethinking the Nature of Astrology* (Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2014), pp.51–54.

⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p.24, as quoted in W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1994), p.636.

⁵ Yeats, 'The Tower', in *The Poems*, pp. 240–45: II.97–104.

of alienation from nature in which consciousness begins is really inspired by exactly the opposite feeling.⁶

In Frye's reading of Stevens, the human being and human creativity are united with the Sun (although later in human development alienated from it). Thus, for both Yeats and Stevens, the Sun is a creative force, but eclipsed or 'vaguely seen': an elusive, ungraspable symbol of power. This image of solar inspiration remains true for Harris and Ballard, who both find a transcendent psychological motivation in the Sun's ineffable authority.⁷

Wilson Harris and J. G. Ballard are among the most distinctive voices in English literature of the half-century between 1960 and 2010. In their different styles, they respond to the great psychological, political, and social urgencies of the age. Philip Tew places Harris and Ballard together in a lineage which also includes writers from Virginia Woolf to Muriel Spark, as exemplars of the contemporary novelistic form which explores 'multiple, intersubjective realities.'⁸ One of the ways in which they challenge 'discursive rationality' is through expressing the paradoxes of mythical thought. Both novels in question here portray the dissolution of a rationalist outlook.⁹

Palace of the Peacock and *The Drowned World* can both be read in the light of Jungian individuation, but they are not consistent enactments of depth-psychological theory. Harris describes his psychological ideas as developed in 'dialogue' with those of C. G. Jung.¹⁰ Similarly, in a study of the psychological motive in Ballard's fiction, Samuel Francis observes

⁶ Northrop Frye, 'The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens', in *Northrop Frye on Twentieth-Century Literature* [Collected Works Vol. 29], ed. Glen Robert Gill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp.129–46, p.134.

⁷ The Sun is a recurring presence in both authors' respective oeuvres, not only in the symbolic titles of their later books – Harris's *The Tree of the Sun* (1978), Ballard's, *Empire of the Sun* (1984) – but also, for example, in Harris's sequence of Sun poems of the 1940s and '50s (published in the magazine *Kyk-Over-All*), and Ballard's refracted Sun of *The Crystal World* (1966).

⁸ Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel: Second Edition* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.56.

⁹ Tew, *Contemporary British Novel*, p. 57.

¹⁰ Wilson Harris, 'Wilson Harris interviewed by Alan Riach', in *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, eds Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège: L3 Liège Language and Literature), pp.33–65, p.62, as quoted in Gianluca Delfino, *Time, History, and Philosophy in the Works of Wilson Harris* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2012), p.75.

that, for the Sun-driven quest which drives the conclusion of *The Drowned World*, 'the individuation process envisaged by Jung is recast in terms of the late-Freudian theory of the death instinct.'¹¹ For both – indeed in general for writers who explore the unconscious – as Charles Sugnet says, '[r]ather than imposing over- neat theories, the essential thing is to trace the lines of force which connect the private nighttown to public behaviour.'¹² It is not the role of fiction to reflect psychological theories or scientific hypotheses. The novelist's observations of the world find their own truth, unimpeded by the need for empirical support.

The ability of Harris and Ballard to discern these 'lines of force' is surely enhanced by their respective migrations to the UK (Harris from Guyana, Ballard from China), providing them with unique perspectives on contemporary Western culture. With reference both to Harris and Ballard, Sugnet also notes the advantage of 'exile' to writers in seeing aspects of the environment which others might take for granted.¹³ This outsider perspective fostered by their separate experiences beyond the liberal certainties of Western capitalism, and interest in psychology and the mythical mind results, for both authors, in fictional modes which – their different genres aside – are united in writing myth into the present.

The Drowned World

J. G. Ballard was born in 1930 to British parents in Shanghai, and was, as a child, interned by the Japanese army during the Second World War. He describes this time in terms of the breakdown of normal life, and the exposure of the limits of civilization: the veneer of it, and the behaviours that are thinly veiled under the surface. He explained, 'anyone who has experienced a war first hand knows that it completely overturns every conventional idea of what makes up day-to-day reality. [...] the world changes for you forever.' His experience in the internment camp, in which the adults were 'stripped of all the garments of authority that protect adults generally in their dealings with children' gave the young Ballard 'a

¹¹ Samuel Francis, *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.73.

¹² Charles Sugnet, 'Introduction', in Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, eds, *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers discuss their Working Methods* (London: Allison and Busby, 1981), pp.2–13, p.8. 'Nighttown' is an allusion to the 'Circe' episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

¹³ Sugnet, 'Introduction', p.5.

tremendous insight into what makes up human behaviour.¹⁴ He moved to the UK after the war, where he lived until his death in 2009. Ballard affirmed, around the late 1970s, ‘I still regard England as a foreign country.’¹⁵

In *The Drowned World* we read of an earth experiencing extreme climate change following a ‘succession of gigantic geophysical upheavals [which] had transformed the Earth’s climate’. Solar storms have resulted in depleted barriers against solar radiation. The rising temperature has prompted mass migration, and colonisation ‘of the Antarctic plateau and of the northern borders of the Canadian and Russian continents.’¹⁶ Plant growth has accelerated, with increased mutations. Melting ice-caps and permafrost have raised the sea level, with floods compounded by dislodged top-soil damming the oceans. Powerful radiation has caused a ‘steady decline in mammalian fertility’,¹⁷ but amphibians and reptiles thrive alongside flora and fauna of the Palaeozoic and Triassic eras. Our setting is one flooded city (later confirmed to be London) occupied only by a handful of soldiers and scientists, many of whom are afflicted by shared dreams of a prehistoric landscape and a huge, pulsating, captivating Sun. ‘The solar disc was no longer a well-defined sphere, but a wide expanding ellipse that fanned out across the eastern horizon like a colossal fire-ball [...]. By noon, less than four hours away, the water would seem to burn.’¹⁸ In a memorable scene, uncanny giant Triassic iguanas freely roam the city boardrooms.¹⁹ This recolonization by a new dominant species in a place of business rather than of politics or religion seemingly affirms the contemporary truism that commerce and advertising are the most effective Western authority. The iguanas’ presence seems to tell us that these deposed authorities had hitherto restrained humans’ mythic impulse through their kitsch re-figuration of reality. Only now are we all living on a mythic scale once more.

The characters of *The Drowned World* experience a dual reality. Even before he is afflicted by the dreams, the protagonist, Robert Kerans notes

¹⁴ J. G. Ballard ‘Reality is a Stage Set’, in J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962; repr. London: Fourth Estate, 2012), ‘P.S.’ section, p.2.

¹⁵ ‘J. G. Ballard’ (interviewed by Alan Burns), in Burns and Sugnet, *Imagination on Trial*, pp.14–30, p.18.

¹⁶ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.21.

¹⁷ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.23.

¹⁸ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.7.

¹⁹ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.18.

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that he is living 'on two levels'.²⁰ And as the primordial reality begins to dominate Kerans's thoughts, we are told:

the archaic Sun in his mind beat again continuously with its immense power, its identity merging now with that of the real Sun visible behind the rain-clouds. Relentless and magnetic, it called him southward, to the great heat and submerged lagoons of the Equator.²¹

Elsewhere the Sun is described as 'archaeopsychic', a term coined by Canadian psychologist Eric Berne. For whom it defines an aspect of therapeutic regression, a 'child' state of the ego.²² For Ballard, it conjures the resurgence of the primordial unconscious in sympathy with the reversion of the external landscape to prehistoric conditions. The novel dramatizes the confusion of internal and external sensation, and the feeling of living in two incommensurate realities.

A common motif in Ballard's early stories concerns an opposition between a protagonist who remains with, or embraces the new archaic order, and the others who flee – north, off the planet, to whatever post-apocalyptic sanctuary – in an attempt to maintain existing social relations. This is seen as abandonment or dereliction by the protagonists. But there is no utopian promise for those who embrace the resurgent atavism. Kerans commits to a lonely, doomed trip south in a potentially meaningful, but unavoidably fatal communion with the Sun. Such stories suggest a binary attitude to the mythic: a choice of either nihilistic avoidance (as in the evacuees) or solipsistic folly (in the protagonists). What drives the fools, though, is a conviction of reality – a contact with emotion, senses, the present moment. In seeking the mythic, we seek wakefulness, contact with the world, and a full, emotional release from the numbing ether of modernity.

Ballard's Sun provides co-ordinates for a physical journey, but, as in *Palace of the Peacock*, the physical process has a psychological counterpart. In *The Drowned World*, the correlation of the physical journey south and the psychological descent is anticipated by Kerans's assistant, Alan Bodkin:

²⁰ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.34.

²¹ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.161.

²² Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.147; Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (London: Deutsch, 1966).

I am convinced that as we move back through geophysical time so we re-enter the amniotic corridor and move back through spinal and archaeopsychic time, recollecting in our unconscious minds the landscapes of each epoch, each with a distinct geological terrain, its own unique flora and fauna, as recognisable to anyone else as they would be to a traveller in a Wellsian time machine. Except that this is no scenic railway, but a total reorientation of the personality.²³

Bodkin alludes to a type of regression and a concomitant reawakening of archaic memories of the collective unconscious. The Sun symbolises both a physical and psychical destination. The spiritual dimension of this journey is magnified towards the end of the novel, when Kerans, travelling south on foot through a ‘phantasmagoric forest’, comes to the remains of ‘a small temple’:

Tilting gate posts led towards a semicircle of shallow steps, where five ruined columns formed a ragged entrance. The roof had collapsed, and only a few feet of the side walls still stood. At the far end of the nave the battered altar looked out over an uninterrupted view of the valley, where the Sun sank slowly from sight, its giant orange disc veiled by the mists.²⁴

The picture here is akin to a Romantic or Gothic vision of pagan ruins in a sublime setting of an expansive valley with an engorged Sun shrouded by occluding mist. It is unclear how far south he has ventured: it could be a Christian ruin on the South Downs; it could be Delphi. Kerans approaches the temple in apparent ignorance of the religion practiced (it is not named): the erstwhile activity as obscure to him as Stonehenge is to us. But the sublime affect provides connection: the church’s high position above a valley has resonance that transcends denominations and doctrines.

For Kerans, the church initially promises shelter and sanctuary – that other established function of the house of God. But from the vantage point of the altar, the ruined walls offer a view of the giant, pulsating Sun. Here Kerans discovers someone he knows: Lieutenant Hardman, whose primordial visions called him away from the city some time before Kerans himself left. Kerans hears a gasping groan from the roasted and wasted

²³ Ballard, *Drowned World*, pp.44.

²⁴ Ballard, *Drowned World*, pp.169–70.

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charcoal body of Hardman. ‘The disc [of the Sun] had pulsed again, apparently drawing forth this strangled response, half in protest, half in gratitude.’²⁵ Kerans does not interpret Hardman’s fate as a warning against his terminal pilgrimage to commune with the Sun-god. Hardman’s ambivalent response to the Sun’s pulse is consistent with the binary, or paradoxical activity of the numinous, and humanity’s relationship with it: both blessing and curse, a violent grace (*charis biaios*), as Aeschylus put it.²⁶ Is Kerans performing a skewed, ignorant worship of the divine, as when Semele was tricked into asking Zeus to reveal himself to her in his true form? Gregory Stephenson has offered a positive interpretation.

The process of psychic metamorphosis, the “descent through archaeopsychic time” [...] must inevitably result in physical death, as they recognize, but death is not its goal; that is it is not merely an expression of the death-wish. Indeed, on the contrary, it may be said that the metamorphosis is an expression of the life drive, for it represents the irresistible desire to unite with the very source and ground of all being, as symbolized by the interior Sun. The death of the ego and the death of the body are not ends in themselves, but means to the fullest self-realization and to fulfillment in union with ultimate, infinite being.²⁷

In this reading, physical death in *The Drowned World* is tempered by transcendence and by the perception of states of being that lie beyond material reality. The Sun becomes re-deified as the focus of pilgrimage and communion, and the engine of transcendent experience. This modern eschatology – the transcending of material limits in acknowledgement of an ineffable reality – at the culmination of *The Drowned World* is the same that is explored in paradoxical depth in *Palace of the Peacock*.

Palace of the Peacock

Sir Wilson Harris was born in Guyana in 1921. He moved to the UK in 1959, where he wrote *Palace of the Peacock*, and where he lived until his

²⁵ Ballard, *Drowned World*, p.170.

²⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, in David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas, eds, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), line 182.

²⁷ Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and Into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), p.47.

death in 2018. The language of Harris's novels is often characterised as 'difficult', for their querying of fixed narratives and dissolution of individualist viewpoints. It is a style which is rooted in his experience as a government surveyor in 1940s and '50s, where he became acquainted with the Guyanese interior and Amerindian presence. Of his first expedition into the interior, Harris has said,

I had penetrated 150 miles. It seemed as if one had travelled thousands and thousands of miles, and in fact had travelled to another world, as it were, because one was suddenly aware of the density of the place. One was aware of one's incapacity to describe it, as though the tools of language one possessed were inadequate.²⁸

This led to his attempt to write outside of the patterns of realism, resulting in a style which is vividly protean, in which everything is liable to metamorphosis. The persistent transformation and contradiction spiritedly resuscitates the thought-patterns of myth.

Palace of the Peacock is a dreamlike text: characters wake from dreams to find themselves in dreams; dreams dissolve into other dreams, people live and die, live again, and exist in abstract states between life and death and after death; the text allegorises the world's creation, hell and heaven; characters are confused with their doubles. It is narrated by a mixture of first- and third-person narrative, where the first person disappears and reappears in the story. It is in a state of perpetual metamorphosis. In this sense, it is a mythic text – not just in the literary sense of myth as dealing with our relationship with transcendental forces, but also as reflecting anthropological research. Ethnographer Eric Dardel explains that mythic time is constructed of simultaneities, citing the New Guinea myth of the man-bird, who occupies both states of being – man and bird – simultaneously. Dardel says,

By virtue of this mythic time, man feels united to all generations, to all the living: he feels himself in his grandparent as well as in his grandson, in the totemic lizard

²⁸ Wilson Harris, 'A Talk on the Subjective Imagination', *New Letters* 40 (Oct. 1973): pp. 37–48, repr. Wilson Harris, *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup and Sydney: Dangaroo): pp.58–60, p.58, as quoted in Delfino, *Time, History, and Philosophy*, p.110.

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gliding across his path as well as in the ancestral tree where the past meditates on the present. Deprived of ontological ground, not knowing just “where” his I is, the mythic man cannot distinguish what was from what will be and from what goes to make up the present.²⁹

This serves as a compatible summary of the world of *Palace of the Peacock*: of characters being between life and death; the totemic symbolism of the spider; mysteries of outer and inner vision; and, as a perpetual strand through the book, the transcendent power of the Sun.

On a surface level, *Palace of the Peacock* narrates a journey upriver into the Guyanese rainforest, of an ethnically diverse crew led by the dangerous and charismatic figure of Donne. They are in search of an elusive outpost Mission, which is metonymically conflated with a woman called Mariella who appears in the opening chapters in a series of dreams: she is Donne’s murderer, his concubine, and his captive. The crew continues, with a captive Arawak woman as a guide (a further figuration of Mariella), ostensibly in search of fugitive natives, but truly in search of wholeness, individuation, the afterlife. The time period may at times be the sixteenth century, at times the twentieth, or otherwise.

If *The Drowned World* can be seen as dividing realities – a nihilistic, realist sanctuary versus a solipsistic mythic communion – *Palace of the Peacock* dives wholeheartedly into the archaeopsychic realm, but returns a less atomised, and perhaps less pessimistic, report. As it is in *The Drowned World*, the Sun is the prompt for a physical and psychical journey, with the crew using the ‘map of the Sun’.³⁰ Lines from a poem by Donne’s namesake, John Donne (1572–1631) form the epigraph to Book Three of *Palace of the Peacock*. In this poem, ‘Hymn to God my God, in My Sickness’, the poet’s physicians become ‘Cosmographers, and I their Mapp’.³¹ Harris’s ‘map of the Sun’ builds on this image: the Sun is the symbol of symbols – variously interpretable and containing multitudes. It is, and contains, the entire territory of the quest.

²⁹ Eric Dardel, ‘The Mythic’ in Alan Dundes, ed., *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp.225–43, p.232.

³⁰ Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960; repr. London: Faber, 1998), p. 4.

³¹ John Donne, ‘Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse’, in *Complete English Poems*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Everyman, 1994), pp.385–86, line 7.

In keeping with the mythic themes of paradox and metamorphosis, the Sun's power is both oppressive and visionary. As expressions of its visionary and oppressive qualities, it is also connected to eyesight, blinding, and fantasy. Both Donne and the narrator are, at points in the book blind in one or both eyes. But with this comes a deeper vision, and sometimes they seem to combine the inner vision with their material sight. Their lives are connected as brothers, doubles, and opposites, recalling the indigenous Guyanese Wapishana twins, 'Tuminikar, a solar deity and a friend to humans, and his brother, Duid, the moon, who is a trouble-making underminer and trickster',³² although for Harris, the roles are not so clearly defined. Donne may be troublesome, but the moon is only rarely invoked (notably the new moon encountered shortly before Donne's final death).³³ The Sun is the more constant presence, and not necessarily friendly.

The range of the Sun's power is established in the abundant references to it in the first three chapters of the book. In the second paragraph the dead, clear eyes of Donne are contrasted with the living eyes of the narrator, which are 'blinded and ruled' by the Sun.³⁴ This establishes the repeated inversion of blind living eyes, and dead, visionary sight, which persists throughout the novel. Eyes are also associated with the Sun as a harsh, bewildering overlord. When Donne asserts that to rule the land is to rule the world, he tells the narrator, "Look at the Sun." [Donne's] dead eye blinded mine. "Look at the Sun," he cried in a stamping terrible voice.³⁵ The Sun is the ultimate example of authority, as well as evoking the inner vision which accompanies blindness. Godlike in its dual nurturing and destructive power (the *charis biaios* again), the Sun also offers the path to transcendence.

The Sun is closely connected with the voyagers: on a day of half-cloud, half-Sun, Donne himself becomes a shadow, and the crew 'active ghosts'. It anticipates the transition away from materiality in the final chapters. As the narrator comments, 'It was the first breaking dawn of the light of our soul.'³⁶ The transformative role of the Sun is confirmed in a passage which

³² David Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.363. Cf. Charles Russell Coulter and Patricia Turner, eds, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities* (London: Routledge, 2012), p.478, and John Ogilvie, 'Creation Myths of the Wapisiana and Taruma', *Folklore* 51, no. 1 (1940): pp.64–72.

³³ Harris, *Palace*, p.105.

³⁴ Harris, *Palace*, p.19.

³⁵ Harris, *Palace*, p.23.

³⁶ Harris, *Palace*, p.33.

merges the symbols of scapegoat, Christ's transubstantiation, South American mythology, and Jungian psychology, in Harris's personal figure of the spider as the earthly avatar of the Sun. The most sustained manifestation of the spider comes when the boat enters rapids and crew-member Wishrop falls overboard. The calamity coincides with the boat righting itself, 'driven by the naked spider of spirit'.³⁷ Wishrop's flesh is ingested by the crew, something which is later described as 'transubstantiation'.³⁸ Then a crew-member named Vigilance has a vision of Wishrop's spidery skeleton climbing the cliffs by the river. The image of the spider refigures itself among the crew: Vigilance 'drew himself up like a spider in a tree'; and Donne tries to keep up the crew's and his own spirits, but he senses his own death or his being-dead. Nevertheless, he remains sensible to 'the traumatic spider of the Sun [which] crawled up and down his arms and his neck and punctured his side of rock'.³⁹ The spider, as often for Harris, represents the wheel-like movement on the web to symbolise cyclical recurrence and transformative rebirth. The traumatic element here seems to respond to the horrific fate of Wishrop, but also to recognise the trials of the psychic process towards wholeness. Crucially, the spider is an emissary of the Sun. The spider circling in its web, as the sinister double of dead and visionary humans, is the earthly symbol of the cycles, traumas, and transcendence of which the Sun is the pre-eminent image.

The novel concludes at the otherworldly Palace of the Peacock, the windows of which are filled with faces, including those of the voyagers. Finally, for Donne, the Sun becomes 'the mirror of absolute nothingness' as he confronts the uselessness of his conquistadorial ambition.⁴⁰ The Sun ruthlessly reflects back Donne's false persona to him, as he encounters his doubles and completes the mental and physical trials which confirm him on his path to wholeness, or to individuation. At this apotheosis, the Sun-mirror is the opposite of Ballard's bloated, pulsing disc: 'He focused his blind eye with all penitent might on this pinpoint star and reflection as one looking into the void of oneself upon the far greater love and self-protection that have made the universe'.⁴¹ No longer the Sun, Donne looks into himself and finds there an ineffable wholeness. But the Sun still rises,

³⁷ Harris, *Palace*, p.81.

³⁸ Harris, *Palace*, p.83.

³⁹ Harris, *Palace*, p.83.

⁴⁰ Harris, *Palace*, p.99.

⁴¹ Harris, *Palace*, p. 07.

eventually transmuting in a moment of synaesthesia: ‘The Sun grew higher still and the fluid light turned and became a musical passage’.⁴² The narrator experiences ‘the dance of all fulfilment [which] I now held and knew deeply, cancelling my forgotten fear of strangeness and catastrophe in a destitute world.’⁴³ Harris’s disappearing Sun runs on an opposite trajectory to Ballard’s enlarged star, but the visionary power and transcendent affect are similar. In *Palace of the Peacock*, the Sun plays an active role in lighting the whole journey in its visions, traumas, and resolutions, with its refracted symbolism echoed in the earthly spider and celestial music. It is an omnipresent deity with multiple associations, but ultimately a guide to spiritual unity.

Twentieth-Century Sun-God

The respective styles of Harris and Ballard are different strategies to respond to a fundamental inability to represent the numinous or the ineffable in rational discourse. Harris draws on his ethnological experience to express the essential contradiction of the human condition. Ballard’s language by contrast is spare, unsensationalist, dispassionate, and descriptive. In the case of *The Drowned World*, it can be confounding in its detailed realism and occasionally pulpy, expository dialogue. But this very feature heightens the uncanny effect of the events described, as the pulp realism is counterposed by depictions of apocalyptic fantasy. The conjunction serves to sharpen the impression of a traumatically bifurcated reality.

Kerans is detached from the contemporary, rational life going on around him, refusing to leave the post-apocalyptic waste land he inhabits, despite encouragement from others. Instead, he emotionally identifies with prehistoric animals in a sort of totemism, and experiences a transcendental communion with a non-rational world. Matthew Sterenberg claims that, since the early twentieth century, myth has been used as ‘a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures of modernity.’⁴⁴ And that, by ‘mediating between the outer world of the modern technological landscape and the inner world of the psyche, myth could help individuals cope with and find meaning for their lives.’⁴⁵ Thus Ballard’s protagonists, such as Kerans, are ‘left to confront their own psyches and the possibility of

⁴² Harris, *Palace*, p.111.

⁴³ Harris, *Palace*, p.116.

⁴⁴ Matthew Sterenberg, *Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain: Meaning for Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.98.

⁴⁵ Sterenberg, *Mythic Thinking*, pp.98–9.

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primitive regression, [... discovering] within a more authentic, more psychologically integrated self.⁴⁶ In *The Drowned World*, as we revert to archaic principles, it is what is arguably our first deity, the Sun, which is the enabler of the integrated self. The Sun as deity – if not interventionist as such – has become active again: a god resurrected from its exile as passive sky-disc. Ballard knows its true power as, in *The Drowned World*, it burns through centuries of alienating human social relations.

Harris writes from a similar concern with the alienating effects of modernity, particularly in the role of the mass media. But Harris differs by taking inspiration directly from his experiences in the Guyanese rainforest, among people who live with complete interconnectedness between mind, body, and outside world. As Harris put it:

When I speak of the unconscious I'm not only speaking of the human unconscious but of the unconscious that resides in objects, in trees, in rivers, I'm suggesting that there is a psyche, a mysterious entity that links us to the unconscious in nature.⁴⁷

Elaborating on his technique, Harris has argued that, in his fiction, 'one reads apparently unbearable events as bearable art, bearable translation of impending events for which one is—in some degree—curiously prepared.'⁴⁸ Moreover, he relates the density of his writing to 'a profound dialogue with the past which allows one to sense the possibilities of a new dimension, which would allow a society that is hideously trapped in a given place and time to understand that it is not *so* trapped.'⁴⁹ In *Palace of the Peacock* the Sun is the gateway for such a visionary understanding, opening the possibility of a transcendent and spiritual unity.

Palace of the Peacock and *The Drowned World* offer different perspectives of the same condition: a human in modernity captivated by the power of the Sun. Today, as in the past, the Sun symbolises vision (by giving light), life (by causing growth), magic (in inspiring good cheer and

⁴⁶ Sterenberg, *Mythic Thinking*, p.119.

⁴⁷ Harris in Vera M. Kutzinski, 'The Composition of Reality: A Talk with Wilson Harris', *Callaloo* 18, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): pp.13–32, p.20.

⁴⁸ Wilson Harris, 'The Fabric of the Imagination', *Third World Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1990): pp.175–86, p.179.

⁴⁹ 'Wilson Harris' (interviewed by Alan Burns), in Burns and Sugnet, *Imagination on Trial*, pp. 51–65, p.57, original emphasis.

awe), and danger (in its intense heat). The range of associations encapsulates the paradox of myth and the numinous (like Hardman's mixed protest and gratitude). Ballard presents a seemingly objective conflict between materialist and symbolic casts of mind, with a troubling conclusion in which the authentic self is in conflict with healthy physical existence. Harris takes us directly into the mind of someone engaged in the symbolic journey into the Sun, implying a slippage between states of reality, and between life and death, culminating in a redemptive, mystical communion. In these novels, we may say that, post-Enlightenment, there is an ironic Copernican revolution which, by instituting a heliocentric cosmic model, thereby returns the Sun to its position as primal deity. As such, the Sun (Ra, Surya, Amaterasu, Helios, *et al.*) is recognised again as having *central* symbolic importance. Consequently, the Sun is confirmed as having its essential power of light and heat matched by an enduring psychological power over our moods, sanity, and sense of self, combined with the visionary potential for spiritual fulfilment.