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“My Dead Seeing Eye”: Fantasy, Franchise, and the Image of the Voyeur in Wilson Harris’s Palace of the Peacock

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Abstract

Wilson Harris's 1960 novel *Palace of the Peacock*, the first in his *Guyana Quartet* that center on the history and society of Harris's, presents a surreal and disorienting account of a doomed voyage up an unnamed jungle river, which culminates in a mystical, visionary experience of the palace of the title, seemingly a metaphysical space beyond death. Understanding the novel's bizarre qualities requires grasping the way they relate to the development of the motif of voyeurism central to the novel. Specifically, they can be seen as frequently tied to the novel's use of the image of the voyeur, the voyeur's appearance to themselves as part of the scene which they are watching, which is employed in the text not only to create its surreal sensibility, but also to comment on the question of political franchise then current in Guyanese society. As the nation moved from British colony to independent state, there was much controversy over who would be allowed to vote in the new country, with many within elite circles holding that franchise should be restricted to the wealthy and well-educated. In its use of the image of the voyeur, *Palace of the Peacock* critiques these elitist notions by depicting people who were once passive observers of their own lives and desires becoming actively engaged in them, serving as a metaphor for a more egalitarian political future for the country.

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I. Introduction

Palace of the Peacock, Guyanese writer Wilson Harris's 1960 novel, ends in a bizarre, otherworldly scene, with the crew of the novel's doomed river voyage seeming resurrected and reunited in the sublime space of the titular palace:

> This was the inner music and voice of the peacock I suddenly encountered and echoed and sang as I had never heard myself sing before. I felt the faces before me begin to fade and to part company from me and from themselves as if our need for one another was now fulfilled, and our distance from one another was the distance of a sacrament, the sacrament and embrace we knew in one muse and one dying soul. Each now held at last in his arms what he had been for ever seeking and what he had eternally possessed.[1]

In this transcendent vision, each crewmember watches his fellows watch him while experiencing unity and ecstatic fulfilment as they fade from one another's sight. Such an intensely mystical scene can appear to be a sudden departure, even for a text like Harris's novel, with its surreal, disorienting descriptions and its shifts in basic facts of story. Yet this conclusion plays on, and indeed brings to fulfilment, one of the central motifs of the work, namely voyeurism, and specifically *the image of the voyeur*, the voyeur turned into a visible part of the scene they are watching. Integrating the once passive voyeur into the scenario they had previously only enjoyed vicariously, the image of voyeur both expresses the psychosexual subtext of the novel while also playing a central role in the text's commentary on questions of mass political participation and franchise that were current and ongoing in the decolonizing Guyana of the 1950s. By transforming a fantasy that separates its subject from their own desires into one that reconciles them, *Palace of the Peacock* uses the image of the voyeur to critique anti-democratic notions of the people's inability to rule themselves, showing characters coming to take on an active role in their own fantasies and their own governance.

The novel follows Donne, a forceful and overbearing estate owner, as he captains an excursion up an unnamed jungle river, initially it seems to retrieve his long-suffering mistress, a native woman named Mariella, from a mission the mountains. Once they reach the mission, however, she vanishes from the narrative as "Mariella" comes to instead refer to the mission itself, while Donne pushes his crew to assist him in rounding up fugitive native laborers to work on his estate during the upcoming planting season. The excursion is ostensibly narrated by one of the crewmembers, Donne's brother, yet as the novel progresses, the narration loses such grounding, coming to seem more disembodied and omniscient as the novel reaches its conclusion.

Given the unreality of the novel's plot and description, it is unsurprising that Harris developed a reputation as a "difficult" and "dense"

[1] Wilson Harris. *Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber & Faber, 2021, pg. 126

prose stylist, owing to the richly symbolic style of his works which prize metaphor and often arcane description over plot and rationality. This has often led critics to attribute a "shamanic" quality to his works, tracing this influence to the religious practices of Guyana. While these practices, and their attendant concepts, no doubt shape Harris' writing, his work's surreal qualities can also be seen as reflective of the nature of unconscious fantasy. Understanding how *Palace of the Peacock* makes use of fantasies of voyeurism and exhibitionism requires first looking that the political context which the novel is responding to, and then briefly at the nature of voyeuristic fantasy, before moving on to a close reading of the novel.

II. Guyanese Independence and the Question of Franchise

Guyana, an imperial holding of Britain since the beginning of the 19th century, and a directly ruled Crown colony since the late 1920s, began the process of decolonization in the years after the Second World War. As historian Colin A. Palmer has discussed, a major point of contention during this process was the question of who would enjoy franchise in the newly constituted nation. Colonial elites and business interests, at whose behest Britain militarily ousted the colony's newly elected government and dissolved its constitution in 1953, would spend the years immediately following agitating for restrictions on voting as a means of "stabilizing" the country and ensuring prosperity. As Palmer notes, "the elite distrusted the capacity of those at the bottom of the social order to make responsible electoral judgments," and that this "distrust of nonelites sprang from a view that they were incapable of understanding the issues of the moment and could be easily manipulated by politicians."[2] The masses of the soon-to-be independent nation were viewed as ill-suited, given their supposed lack of intelligence and knowledge, to ruling their country wisely. This elitist belief in the people's impudence motived the Robertson Commission, a committee assembled in 1954 by the Crown to recommend a new constitution for the colony, to focus on restricting to propose restricted voting rights for the young country, Palmer stating that "the question of who should be allowed to vote was the most contentious issue that the commission confronted" and in response "they directed their venom at the illiterate voters and sought to deny them franchise altogether."[3] Palmer quotes one member of the committee as stating that "to claim that an illiterate labourer is the political equal to a large merchant or well established professional is an absurdity,"[4] the elite objection to mass participation in politics framed in both economic and educational terms.

It should be noted that this objection was not voiced solely by Crown officials, but came from powerful people within the colony as well. For instance, the Joint Trade Union Committee, a coalition of unions represent-

[2] Colin A. Palmer. *Cheddi Jagan and the Politics of Power: British Guiana's Struggle for Independence*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010, pg. 124

[3] Ibid, pgs. 137-8

[4] Ibid, pg. 138

ing workers in the sugar industry, recommended such a strict set of wealth and educational requirements for voting that, as Palmer points out, they were "proposing a franchise for which most of its members would not qualify," going on to note that "it is astonishing that the workers' representatives would suggest restrictions on the franchise that would dilute their electoral impact,"[5] implying that elite distaste for popular rule had come to permeate Guyanese society more broadly. Given this, it is unsurprising that questions of franchise would remain in contention until the country's formal independence in 1966.

While Harris's narrative of excursion and exploitation has, as Sandra E. Drake contends in her seminal study of Harris's work, clear resonances with Guyana's history of colonization,[6] these more recent, and far less dramatic, struggles over franchise and voting rights would appear by contrast to be far removed from the novel's concerns. Yet, its depiction of Donne's excursion allows the novel to comment on the question of mass participation in government by way of reference to one of the earliest and most enduring critiques of democratic power, Plato's parable of the "ship of state."

In his *The Republic*, Plato illustrates his objection to democracy by way of the image of a ship with a near-sighted captain who is thus at the mercy of factions of sailors vying to be placed at the helm. The eventual victor is not the one most adept at sailing, but the one most adept at manipulating the myopic captain; the navigator, a stargazer whose knowledge is of sailing and not manipulation, is by this barred from leadership. The ship and its crew reward skill at flattery instead of skill at watching the stars and sea, opening the way for a mismanaged voyage.[7] Similarly for Plato, democratic societies separate power from vision, rewarding those who can sway the masses with influence at the expense of those who see and have useful knowledge. Sir Desmond Lee sums up the meaning of Plato's parable as saying that "the people are bad judges in many political matters. The common man has no experience or expert knowledge of such things as foreign policy or economics," and, as a result, "the people's judgement of their leaders is not always good, and they can't be trusted to make best choice."[8] This inability to choose leaders well stems, for Plato, from what he sees as the personal character encouraged by democracy, marked by a lack of discernment resulting from its tolerant attitude holding all manners of living as equal.[9] Democratic liberty frees the people to live according only to their desires, allowing a multitude of pursuits, each granted equal protection by the state. All equally valid before the law, these pursuits come to appear equally valid to the people of a democracy, undermining their ability to

[5] Ibid, pg. 140
[6] Sandra E. Drake. *Wilson Harris and the Modern Tradition: A New Architecture of the World*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986, pg. 45
[7] Plato. *The Republic*. Translated and Introduced by Sir Desmond Lee. London and New York: Penguin, 1987, pg. 222
[8] Sir Desmond Lee. "Translator's Introduction." *The Republic* by Plato. Translated and Introduced by Sir Desmond Lee. New York and London: Penguin, 1987, pg. xxvii.
[9] Plato, pg. 314

distinguish good from bad desires and leaving them without reason to deny any of them. The resulting licentiousness sparks class conflict, as the poor are pitted against the rich for the resources needed to realize these desires. Into this tumult steps the tyrant, who violently pursues his own desires and, in doing so, puts an end to liberty.[10] Echoes of Plato's criticism of democracy can be heard in the Robertson Committee's distrust of the people of Guyana to govern themselves properly due to their supposed lack of vision and knowledge. Also like the Robertson Commission, Plato recommends a bulwark against democracy's decay into licentiousness and tyranny, in his case it is his philosopher-king, a figure who has sublimated his baser desires into a noble drive for truth and justice, and thus possesses the wisdom to rule well and to ensure the general peace and morality of his society.

Plato's critique functions here by setting up a conflict between base, unsublimated desire and vision, in which the presence of the former interferes with the latter. The people of a democracy, like the crew of the ship of state, have their vision clouded by the appetites they are unable to resist, and thus cannot be trusted to ascertain the proper course of action. Harris's novel can be seen as responding to this critique, not as one may assume by contending that the people can indeed sublimate their desires, but rather by challenging the conflict on which Plato builds his critique. One way that it does this is in its depiction of Donne as a leader who blurs any clear distinction between the philosopher-king and the tyrant he is supposed to keep at bay by showing Donne's desires as sublimated and base in turn. Combining vision and desire in a single leader not only draws attention to the philosopher-king's similarity to the tyrant, but also suggests that the former's insight is not necessarily impeded by the latter's lusts, counter to Plato's assumptions.

On the one hand, Donne stands in stark contrast to the captain from Plato's parable; he, for one, is not near-sighted like that captain, but has keen, unfailing vision, as alluded to when the narrator at one point says to him that "Nothing kills *your* sight,"[11] an allusion to Donne's drive and his close control of his crew. This close control is on display when Donne is announcing to the crew that they will be continuing up river beyond the mission, the narrator stating that "he started suddenly addressing the company in the lurid storm but it was as if he only spoke to himself… Words came as if from a frightened spiritual medium and translation. Meaning was petrified and congealed and then flashing and clear upon his rigid face and brow hanging in his own ultimatum and light."[12] Donne's power does not come from flattering the crew, or gaining their consent, but from his own wisdom, his words imbued with a spiritual force and meaning that renders the crew passive and compliant. The voyage at the novel's center can thus be seen as a reversal of Plato's parable, with the vessel helmed not by a myopic and suggestible captain, but one who combines vision and power together

[10] Ibid, pgs. 318-21
[11] Harris, pg. 11
[12] Ibid, pg. 45

into his person, bringing him close to the ideal of the philosopher-king. Contrary to Drake's point that "the 'voyage' is the embodiment of the idea of a nation and a people 'all in the same boat'," [13] the river journey emphasizes the divisions within Guyanese society, specifically the division between those who rule the country and those who simply live in it.

On the other hand, Donne is at the same time clearly in the thrall of his own base desires, particularly his lust for Mariella, as the narrator notes that "Mariella was the obsession we must encounter at all costs, and we needed gifted souls in our crew… His face grew younger and brutal and impatient too. And innocent like a reflection of everlasting dreaming life." [14] Donne is driven by a passion for Mariella, one that both fires him with a youthful, hopeful vigor and spurs him to rashness and cruelty in much the same manner that Plato's tyrant is fueled in his violence by his appetites. This resemblance is only strengthened when the narrator goes on to tie his passion for Mariella to Donne's conquest of the inland frontier, where "he had established himself as in his brooding hanging house" and "had conquered and crushed the region he ruled, annihilating everyone and devouring himself in turn." [15] Donne emerges here as the archetype of the blood-soaked dictator, even as he appears elsewhere as an enlightened philosopher-king. The fact that he can occupy both roles implies that they are not as distinct and opposed as Plato contends, as well as countering the supposed incompatibility between carnal desire and political vision, since Donne clearly has this vision even as he is wracked with desire for Mariella. These two facets of Donne's character, existing alongside each other as they do, function as an argument against the clear desire/vision divide on which Plato's political theory rests.

Another, more substantial way in which Harris's novel answers Plato's critique is by depicting Donne's crew as possessing vision not in spite but because of their desires, namely thorough their embrace of their desire for looking, i.e., their voyeurism. To fully grasp how the novel utilizes voyeuristic fantasies for this end, one must first look at the nature of these fantasies.

III. Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, and the Nature of Fantasy

As Freud notes in his "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," voyeurism, or scopophilia, emerges as a modification to usually infantile sexual desire. In it, the subject replaces direct experience of the desired object with observation of the desired object, creating a step of remove allowing the subject to partially disavow the desired object. [16] Voyeuristic watching puts the subject in a position to, as it were, witness the forbidden, taking up a position that exists at once within and without the rule

[13] Drake, pg. 13
[14] Harris, pg. 16
[15] Ibid, pg. 16
[16] Sigmund Freud. "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14*. Edited and Translated by James Strachey and Anna Freud. London: Hogarth Press, 1957, pgs. 128-9

of paternal law that forbids the object. This position is epitomized in the scenario of the child witnessing the "primal scene" of parental coitus, since, by witnessing this scene, the subject acknowledges the mother's sexuality while also renouncing it for themselves. Donne's position as paternal figure, evidenced in his statement to the narrator that "Our parents died early," and that because of this "I looked after you, son,"[17] means just such a partial disavowal marks Donne's crew's relationship with Mariella, whom they have given up pursuing, content to instead watch Donne pursue her, now voyeuristically invested in witnessing the event. Thus, while Drake notes that "the relationship Donne and his conquistador-crew bear to Mariella and the 'folk' [natives] parallels the relationships between Europe and 'America,' with 'America' understood as a screen for the projection of fantasies,"[18] not only is it unclear how well Donne's racially complex crew can be equated with "Europe," but the respective fantasies at play for Donne and his crew differ as a result of their differing levels of power; Donne can more directly pursue his fantasies, while the crew's fantasies reflect their subordinate position to Donne.

Yet, as Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bernard Pontalis note, because fantasies, regardless of type, involve an object that is conjured by the subject, the object is in a sense "subjective," allowing the subject to switch places with the fantasized object thus reversing the scenario.[19] In terms of the looking fantasy, this reversibility means that the scene the voyeur wishes to see is conjured out of their desires, making it entirely accessible to them and allowing them to inhabit it, transforming the scenario into one of exhibitionism instead. It is this reversibility that Harris's novel makes use of, transforming the voyeuristic fantasies of the crew into exhibitionist ones in which they are the ones enacting the scenario being viewed.

IV. "Through my dead seeing eye": Voyeuristic Fantasy in *Palace of the Peacock*

Voyeurism, and the question of vision more generally, is established almost immediately as the novel opens, when the narrator declares that "I dreamt I awoke with one dead seeing eye, and one living closed eye."[20] The meaning of the paradoxical "dead seeing eye" can be best grasped within the context of the other paradox in which it appears, the "I dreamt I awoke," suggesting not only a confusion between the states, but that the narrator has come alive to, and gained insight into, the dream, with its barely disguised wish-fulfillments, experiencing an insight into the dream by way of his "dead seeing eye." The narrator's "dead seeing eye" thus appears to be an organ for perceiving what lies hidden in the dream.

[17] Harris, pg. 12
[18] Drake, pg. 52
[19] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" in *Reading French Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Dana Birksted-Breen, Sara Flanders, and Alain Gibeault. Translated by David Alcorn, Sophie Leighton, and Andrew Weller. London: Routledge, 2010, pg. 335.
[20] Harris, pg. 7

What the narrator sees in the dream is shortly revealed when, during the dream, his brother Donne enters his room, complaining about Mariella and looking out the window. "I followed his eyes and realized he was addressing a little shack partly hidden in a clump of trees. Someone was emerging from the shack and out of the trees. She was barefoot and bent forward to feed the chickens. I saw the backs of her knees and the fine beautiful grain of her flesh. Donne looked at her as at a larger and equally senseless creature whom he governed like a fowl" (9). The narrator's "dead seeing eye" is engaged in eroticized looking at Mariella, whom Donne claims control of and who is thus forbidden to the narrator; this "dead seeing eye," then, is properly speaking, the voyeur's eye, as it continues to see what is forbidden even after accepting the "death" of castration/blinding. Carnal desire, then, does not rob the narrator of his vision, as the Platonic framework would have it, but instead imbues looking with urgency and power.

This is supported by what happens immediately after this eroticized looking at Mariella, when "half-awake," the narrator reports Mariella's own visit to his room: "she shuddered and sobbed 'He beat me,' she burst out at last. She lifted her dress to show me her legs. I stroked the firm beauty of her flesh and touched the ugly marks where she had been whipped. "Look," she said, and lifted her dress still higher."[21] Rather than being a "real," "waking," event, this would appear to be another dream, one that looks to speak more directly to the underlying desire for Mariella that was displaced into watching her. Yet, this dream is itself no simple matter, as the "ugly marks" left on her thighs by his brother imply to the narrator sadistic scenes between his brother and Mariella that he can now enjoy as a spectator. This is supported by the dream cutting off shortly after this, right before Mariella is fully exposed and available to him and his voyeurism would cross over into actually participating in the sex act. This second dream, then, does not so much reveal the "truth" of the narrator's disavowed desire of the first one, but rather stages the consequences of this very disavowal, the voyeuristic fantasy and then its effects. The relationship between these back-to-back dreams is important, as it sets a pattern that plays out throughout the novel, that of the scene cherished by a voyeuristic character coming to contain the voyeur themselves, introducing to events depicted a bewildering mirror-effect.

This can be seen at work in the way the crewmembers regard their excursion upriver to the mission by the falls to find Mariella. The narrator notes that "the odd fact existed of course that their living names matched the names of a famous dead crew that had sunk in the rapids and been drowned to a man, leaving their names inscribed on Sorrow Hill which stood at the foot of the falls."[22] Their excursion, then, is marked from the beginning by a sense of déjà vu, a sense that all of this has happened before. This sense can be attributed to the fact that, in their journey to claim Mariella, the crewmembers recognize their own disavowed desire for Mariella, the maternal figure, in their voyage to return her

[21] Ibid, pg. 9

[22] Ibid, pg. 16

to Donne, a reunion they will be witness to. The crew has displaced their own wishes to journey and claim Mariella onto seeing Donne achieve it, and now Donne's journey to do so seems to them familiar. This reading gains credence from Donne's own thoughts on the excursion. The narrator notes that "though he was the last to admit it, he was glad for a chance to return to that first muse and journey, when Mariella had existed like a shaft of fantastical shapely dust in the sun, a fleshly shadow in his consciousness."[23] Donne conceives of the excursion as a reenactment of his initial seduction of Mariella, the journey's sense of familiarity rooted in its relationship to Donne's liaison with Mariella.

The political valence of this voyeuristic fantasy can be seen later in the novel in a bizarre feature of its narrative, that when the excursion reaches the mission, "Mariella" the woman vanishes from the story, the name "Mariella" used now to refer to the mission itself, the mission where Donne now seeks fugitive laborers for his estate. This dream-like slippage connects the crew's investment in Donne's pursuit of Mariella to his exercise of power over his holdings, fantasy and rule tied together by the name "Mariella."

Yet, for the novel, this fantasy also forms the basis for a vision of social life more egalitarian than Donne's rule, stemming from the fact that the crewmembers are at once participants in the excursion, in that they are actively assisting Donne reach the Mission and Mariella, and spectators of the excursion, as they are voyeuristically invested in the sexual relationship between Mariella and Donne which underlies the voyage. What results is a strange doubling, with the crew both as watchers and the watched, which can be seen at the root of much of the novel's surreal imagery. For example, when the narrator relays the crew's struggle to avoid a dangerous rock just beneath the river's surface, he states:

> It was the size of the moon's reflection in streaming water save for the moment I saw it was broad daylight. The river hastened everywhere around it. Formidable lips breathed in the open running atmosphere to flatter it, many a wreathed countenance to conceal it and half-breasted body, mysterious and pregnant with creation, armed with every cunning abortion and dream of infancy to claim it. Clear fictions of imperious rock they were in the long rippling water of the river. They condescended to knell and sit, half-turning away from, half-inclining and bending towards the pale moon patch of death which spun before them calm as a musical disc.[24]

The description's ambiguity as to what, precisely, is being described allows what are ostensibly personifications of the roiling waters ("formidable lips", "half-breasted body") to appear to refer to the crew as well, their lips "flattering" the rock by expressing panic before it, the "half-breasted" body referring to their reflection in profile in the water as they move toward the rock to collide with and "claim" it. Enmeshed in the waters even as the look on them, the crew is thus watching themselves as they struggle with the river, occupying both the position of viewer and viewed. The source of this double position is alluded to by the "every cunning abortion

[23] Ibid, pg. 17

[24] Ibid, pg. 23

and dream of infancy" that they and their image on the water carry toward the rock, the infantile urges and the dodges required to disavow these urges that have given birth to the voyeuristic fantasy undergirding this encounter. At the same time, reflected in this is the quality of reversibility Laplanche and Pontalis maintain is inherent in all fantasy, including fantasies of voyeurism. Since the object of the fantasy, the sight of Donne pursing Mariella, is conjured by the subject, the subject is already part of that object, and can thus inhabit the position of the object, turning a fantasy of watching Mariella's seduction into one of being watched while seducing Mariella. As such, the crew's looking fantasy is potentially both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic, making it possible for both versions to coincide, the reflection of the river manifesting this double position.

It is from these strange effects of the river that the *image of the voyeur* truly enters the narrative. In the narrator's own fantasy of looking upon Mariella, he remained invisible, effectively outside of the scene he observed, as befitting the classical fantasy of the watcher. At one point, before Mariella had fled, she attempted to draw the narrator into this fantasy by acknowledging him, however he notes that "I turned away from her black hypnotic eyes as if I had been blinded by the sun."[25] Mariella's gaze threatens to terminate the looking fantasy ("as if I had been blinded") with eyes that make the narrator feel drawn into her power ("hypnotic"), that is, desire her directly, instead of having that desire mediated by watching Donne with her, which the narrator avoids. As the crew make their way toward Mariella, however, they become voyeurs who nevertheless lose their separation from the scene they observe and are implicated in it. Yet, instead of simply ending the fantasy and their status as voyeurs observing its events, the crew remain spectators on the scene even as they are drawn into it, conferring a surreal quality on the crew's travel up the river.

This strange doubling, in which the crew are both supporters of and spectators of Donne's journey, can also be seen in the crew's arrival in the area around the mission, the narrator stating that

> The news flew like lightning across the bush. It seemed to fall from the sky through the cloudy trees that arched high in the air and barely touched, leaving the narrowest ribbon of space. The stream that reflected the news was inexpressibly smooth, and the leaves that sprinkled news from the heavens of the forest stood on a shell of expectant water as if they floated half on the air, half on stone. We drove at a walking pace through the brooding reflecting carpet unable to make up our minds where we actually stood.[26]

Here again, this scene, with its strange, topsy-turvy imagery, shows the crew as spectators of their own action, the water coming to resemble the air and forest above, making their arrival on the river a fact of the air as well, a fact that they watch as they would the weather as they approach the mission. As such, the scene also speaks to the larger political utility of the crew's voyeuristic fantasy

[25] Ibid, pgs. 9-10

[26] Ibid, pg. 29

and its reversal, since it allows the crew to witness themselves as active agents accomplishing the task of reaching the mission rather than passively observing Donne doing so. As such, the fantasy has a use that would be lost by simply ending the fantasy altogether, as when Mariella returned the narrator's gaze. Similarly, this effect would also be lost if the fantasy were entirely reversed, as the crew would then only be the ones watched, and not see themselves enacting their desires. Seeing their own image, the image of the voyeur, induces the crew to think of themselves as participants in, rather than just spectators on, the excursion toward the mission. The vision spurred by the crew's desires becomes not one confined to passivity but is able to show them themselves as active agents and thus opening the possibility for their political engagement.

The effect of the excursion, with this doubling and the voyeur's image that it produces, on the crew can be seen in a recollection it brings to the surface for one of the crewmembers, the aptly named Vigilance. After the death of Carroll, Vigilance's stepbrother and fellow crewmember, in the treacherous waters upriver from the mission, Vigilance is reminded of a scene from their childhood, a scene which the narrator prefaces by noting that, as a child, "it was natural for Vigilance to perceive what was going on wherever he lived" and that "he always seemed to see something through a half-open door or window or crack. It was a habit of fortune he possessed."[27] Vigilance thus takes up the role of the voyeur, not only in that he is secretly watching, but that he is accidentally watching, through no intention of his own, so that one's own desire for the witnessed scene can be better obscured. In this instance, Vigilance is witnessing his stepmother and Carroll sequestered in the bedroom in clandestine discussion about the fact that Carroll's stepsister and lover (and Vigilance's blood-sister) Tiny has miscarried the child they had conceived in secret. As she councils the boy to go off and make himself a life in the world, his mother lets slip that "I am with child for your stepfather too," The construction of this admission expresses a couple of illicit possibilities as it implies that both children share a father, hinting at once at an inappropriate relationship between father and daughter and between mother and son. This implication is furthered when, in response to the news, Carroll states that "His child homing and mine dead," his mother responds with "No… is all one in the long run[28]," conflating her son's child and her own and adding an oedipal element to the secret scene.

More importantly, the recollection ends in a somewhat surprising way, as "Carroll's mother looked up suddenly with a sense of unexplored and inexplicable joy. She was startled when she saw Vigilance. 'You here?' she said. 'How long you been listening?'" The boy simply nods in response, the narrator stating that "He knew that the child she carried for his father would live" and that "he felt drawn towards it as towards a child of his own."[29] Carroll's mother draws Vigilance

[27] Ibid., pgs.70-1
[28] Ibid, pg. 74
[29] Ibid, pg. 75

into the scene he was observing, resulting in a sudden flash of his own repressed desires. Instead of being angry or distraught by his presence, Carroll's mother responds with, "You are free to go too, and this time take him with you for ever where you go."[30] This memory helps explain Vigilance and Carroll's investment in Donne's pursuit of Mariella, as it reveals both men's oedipal longings, longings which are easily mapped onto a maternal figure like Mariella. It also, by cropping up when it does, shows how the excursion has transformed the crew, presenting to them a vision of voyeurism that does not exclude them from what is witnessed, which reminds Vigilance of a similar event from his youth. Unlike the narrator recoiling when Mariella returned his gaze, Vigilance accepts being seen as he is watching, and as a result is integrated into the scene with his stepmother, brought into the scenario and made owner again of his own desires. At the same time, this integration comes with a renewed sense of fellow-feeling with Carroll, as if their shared oedipal desires have not made them rivals, but created a sympathy between the two, their joint contravention of paternal law creating a bond between them.

This evasion of paternal law by way of the image of the voyeur is seen again in none other than Donne himself. With only a couple of surviving crewmembers remaining with him as they continue to struggle up the far reaches of the river, Donne comes to a steep waterfall boxed in by cliffs and is forced to proceed by a series of ladders and steps affixed to the rock face. As he climbs, Donne is washed over by wave of memories and regrets, and a result he wishes "to see the indestructible nucleus and redemption of creation, the remote and the abstract image and correspondence, in which all things and events gained their substance and universal meaning. However far from him, however distant, he longed to see, he longed to see the atom, the very nail of moment in the universe."[31] Donne's desire is now one to witness the moment of creation, which implies a desire to witness his own creation. As such, Donne, in Mariella's absence, has stumbled upon the ultimate aim and dream of voyeurism, that is to witness the primal scene of parental coupling and, by extension, one's own conception.

His wish to see this hidden act of creation seems to be answered when, shortly thereafter, Donne is struck by what seems like a vision, the narrator noting that: "His eyes darted from his head and Donne saw a young carpenter in a room. A light shone from the roof and the curtains wreathed slowly."[32] Important to note here is the ambiguous placement of the image: it is reported as if seen before him, through a window, but this does not fit with Donne's material surroundings in any rational way. Rather, it has a hallucinatory quality, a confusion of inner and outer, of psyche and material, a confusion that is inherent to the slippery nature of fantasy. The narrator describes the carpenter, saying "a rectangular face it was, chiselled and cut from cedar of Lebanon. He [Donne] was startled and frightened by the fleshless wood… his

[30] Ibid, pg. 75
[31] Ibid, pg. 108
[32] Ibid, pg. 108

fingers were made of the same wood, the nails made of bark and ivory. Every movement and glance and expression was a chiselling touch, the divine alienation and translation of flesh and blood into anything and everything on the earth. The chisel was as old as life, old as a fingernail."[33] This strange image functions like the image from a dream, collapsing two opposed desires into one. On the one hand, the image of the wooden carpenter speaks to the infantile belief in self-creation, in the narcissistic fantasy that one is one's own father and mother. This fantasy works as a bulwark against the fantasy of witnessing the primal scene, of looking at and seeing one's own conception, as the carpenter using an inherently phallic tool (chisel) associated with life to create something of his own material (his own "flesh and blood"). Thus, looking into this phantom window, Donne is engaged in the very foundational dream of voyeurism, to witness the act of procreation. At the same time, the image also offers Donne a way out from the rule of paternal law: by taking the carpenter as his own image, the image of him as voyeur, Donne is given a way of conceiving himself as having conceived himself, as party to his own creation, and thus free from any claims of paternal power.

This freedom from paternal power is reflected when Donne desperately tries to get the carpenter's attention, the narrator noting that "he hammered again loud to attract his attention, the kind of attention and appreciation dead habit taught him to desire. The carpenter still looked through him as through the farseeing image and constellation of his eye- clouds and stars and sun on the windowpanes."[34] Donne is here likened to the reflection of the carpenter's eye in the window, an image of the watching organ superimposed on the cosmic vista seen through Donne, combining watcher and watched into a single visual that appears to the carpenter in Donne's place, implying that this is indeed Donne's nature. Also, Donne comes to be identified not only with the carpenter but with what the carpenter sees out the window, further reinforcing this status of voyeur and exhibitionist. At the same time, the fact that the carpenter, a figure of paternal authority, does not see Donne himself would seem to indicate that, by embracing this image of the voyeur, Donne has escaped the regime of paternal authority that he had once embodied. As with Vigilance's recollection, Donne's voyeuristic fantasy, by integrating the image of the voyeur into it, offers the subject a vision of liberation.

The image of the voyeur and its importance for the novel can be seen reflected in the slow, strange shift of the narrator from the first person, as a member of the crew, to a more omniscient third person, as if watching the events unfold from an Olympian perspective. At first glance, this would seem to work against the novel's tendency to combine voyeuristic and exhibitionistic perspectives, as the narrator would seem to have been "removed" from the scene and firmly separated from the action. Yet, in effect, this shift denies the narrator a stable, identifiable vantage point in the form of Donne's brother from which to detail the events, resulting in a

[33] Ibid, pg. 109

[34] Ibid, pg. 110

"homeless" narration that cannot for that reason maintain a clear distinction from the events narrated, tending to as such collapse into these events. This accounts in part for moments like the novel's surreal final passage, in which the narrator's existence is decidedly indistinct, the boundaries between himself, his fellow crewmembers, and the occurrences in the palace blurring together. Like the carpenter before Donne and vice versa, the watcher comes to rest in the image of what they are watching, with the narrator in this final scene becoming part of what they witness.

V. Conclusion

Through its use and development of the motif of voyeuristic fantasy, Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* responds to a long tradition of elitist dismissal of popular self-rule by undermining the supposed conflict between base desire and vision that allows that tradition to characterize the people as unable to control themselves and thus attain the wisdom necessary to run the state. Voyeurism, as a passionate desire to see, undercuts this opposition, while providing a way for those long accustomed to political passivity to envision themselves as engaged political actors. As such, the hallucinatory descriptions and bewildering mirror images that express this voyeurism connect the novel to the political and social struggles of its historical moment, the work speaking to debates around franchise and popular sovereignty in the decolonizing world not despite but because of its surreal qualities. In its detailed attention to the voyeuristic fantasies of its characters, *Palace of the Peacock* articulates a defense of vision of the Guyanese masses, one unhindered and even empowered by their desires, against the ideology of a colonial ruling class seeking to curtail popular political participation and universal franchise. The novel issues a challenge to the Platonic foundations of much anti-democratic thought in the West by putting forth an understanding of vision, and the political power it allows, that makes room for desire and thus forestalls elite attempts to disqualify the people on the grounds of those desires. Permeated with a voyeurism that takes the voyeur themselves as part of the scene to be watched, Harris's novel works to undermine distinctions between activity and passivity, and by extension ideologies which seek to consign large swaths of the population to political passivity. *Palace of the Peacock* thus emerges as a hallucinatory response to Plato's ship of state, an unreal and dream-like rebuke to elitist notions of sober and rational government.