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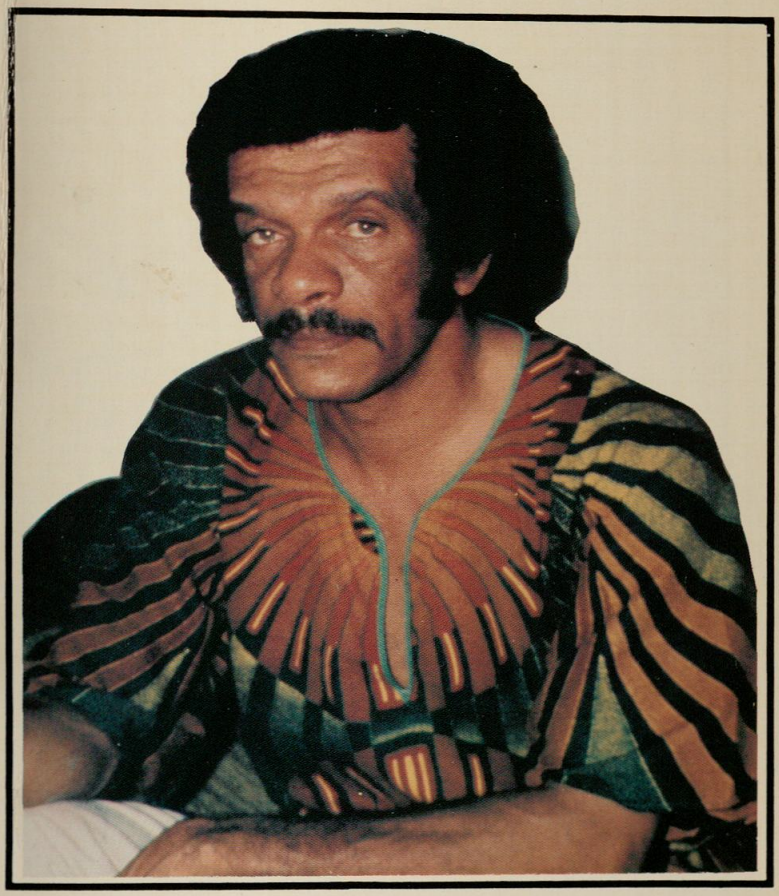
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES on DEREK WALCOTT



Photograph by Robert Hamner

DEREK WALCOTT, 1975

Edited by Robert D. Hamner

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Compiled and Edited
By Robert D. Hamner

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For the muse of my other life

Roseau
Allamanda Oleander
Casuarina Laburnum
Eddoes Jasmine
Lotus Tamarind
Ixora Avocado
Immortelle Nightshade
Aglaia

Judy Stone's "Warner's *Beef, No Chicken* an Inspired Production." Permission granted by *Caribbean Contact.*

Patrick Taylor and *World Literature Written in English* for "Myth and Reality in Caribbean Narrative: Derek Walcott's *Pantomime.*"

The facsimile reproduction of the photograph of Derek Walcott is provided by Robert Hamner. The photograph was taken in Trinidad in September, 1975.

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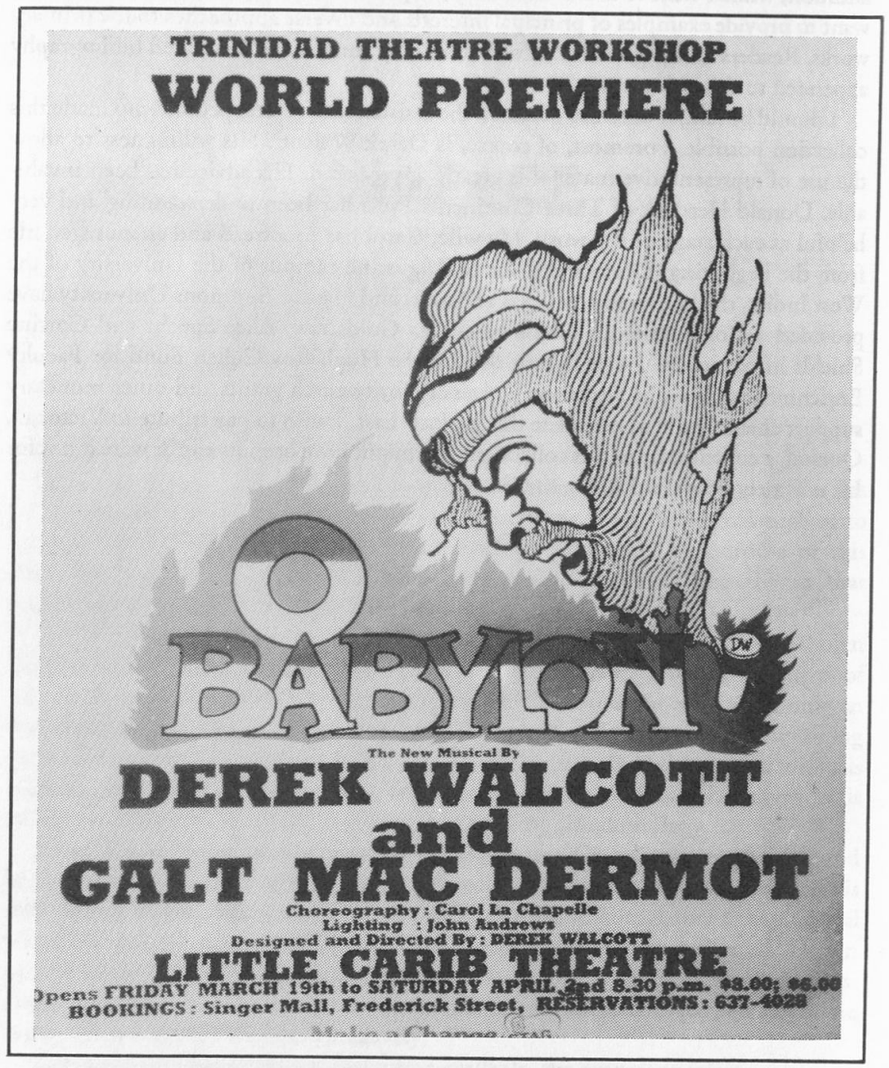

INTRODUCTION

In early youth, Derek Walcott fell in love with language and dreamed of becoming a poet. What makes his dream all the more incredible is the fact that he was born in Castries, capitol of the small Caribbean island of St. Lucia. The obstacles he had to overcome were formidable. Not only was he fatherless in a backwater of fading colonial empire but, as he put it in his autobiographical poem *Another Life*

> The dream
> of reason had produced its monster:
> a prodigy of the wrong age and colour. (3)

Nevertheless, on the dust jacket of *In a Green Night* (1964), his first major collection of verse, Robert Graves proclaimed, "Derek Walcott handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most (if not any) of his contemporaries." And by the time he was in his forties, Walcott counted among his circle of mentors and personal friends Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney.

In the wake of colonialism, Walcott has acquired an international reputation that enhances the growing stature of West Indian literature. The fact that Walcott's life coincides with the Caribbean's independence movements makes his career significant for historic as well as aesthetic reasons.

His father Warwick Walcott died while Derek and twin brother Roderick were hardly a year old. Their mother, Alix Walcott, headmistress of a Methodist grammar school in Castries, assumed the burden of educating the twins and their older sister, Pamela. At St. Mary's College, young Walcott thrived on the traditional curriculum of Western classics. At home he was surrounded by the delicate watercolors and witty, satirical poems left by his father. Then there was the influence of his father's old friend Harold Simmons, an artist who encouraged Walcott to express himself both with brush and pen.

The city of Castries had no book publisher, but by the time he was eighteen, Walcott wanted to see some of his poems in print. Borrowing $200 from his mother, he sent his manuscript off to Trinidad and then sold copies of *25 Poems* (1948) to friends and people in the street until he repaid his mother's investment.

Poetry was only one of his primary vocations. He turned some of his verse into drama for the stage. Along with brother Roderick, and a few others, he founded the St. Lucia Arts Guild in 1950 and produced his earliest plays, such as " Henri Christophe."

After completing his undergraduate education at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1953, and following a brief stint at teaching, he accepted a Rockefeller fellowship to study theater in New York in 1958.

Finding that there were few opportunities for serious black playwrights and actors in the United States, he moved to Trinidad where he wrote a column for the *Trinidad Guardian* and founded his second theatrical troupe, the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959. Since that time, his volumes of poetry and play collections have appeared at regular intervals. Walcott now teaches at Boston University, living parts of each year in Boston and the West Indies.

Walcott has risen from colonial obscurity to international prominence as a direct result of his ability to assimilate and express the disparate elements of a rich social milieu. European exploitation of the West Indies, entails the history of slavery and indentured servitude; yet, along with that history, it also means the ingestion of Renaissance, African, Asian and Oriental cultures. Despite V. S. Naipaul's bleak assertion that nothing has been created in the West Indies (27), Derek Walcott seizes upon the fragments at hand to demonstrate that something new can arise, like the phoenix, out of imperial ashes.

Throughout the social disturbances of the independence-minded fifties and the Negritude and Black Power sixties and seventies, Walcott kept his finger on the pulse of the times without relinquishing his own aesthetic principles. While his models have changed over the years, he began by assimilating European values. As he has matured, his own voice has emerged: a voice informed by the masters of western literature, yet personal and resonant in the lyrical register of the islands.

I Walcott: Artist and Critic

The following collection of essays records Walcott's unique career in two ways. The first ten selections, taken from Walcott's own articles and interviews from 1957 to the last of the 1980s, allow him to speak for himself. The second, larger, group of essays and reviews, introduces a representative sampling of varied critics and their approaches to Walcott from the time he was a teenager until his poetry and plays became accepted as among the best the English language has to offer.

Although Walcott's writings are too extensive to be summarized briefly, the ten pieces comprising part one of this collection exemplify recurrent personal views, major themes and the tenor of his discursive voice. Four newspaper articles between 1957 and 1967 — "Society and the Artist," "History and Picong," "Necessity of Negritude" and "Tribal Flutes" — establish positions that remain virtually unchanged up to the present. He outlines the obstacles confronting artists in the West Indies, admits reservations regarding Negritude and reviews books by fellow Caribbean writers V. S. Naipaul and Edward Brathwaite.

Three more extensive essays provide valuable insights into Walcott's development as a writer and critic. In "Leaving School," he reminisces about childhood, schooling, and sources of inspiration during his early formative years until he left St. Lucia for Jamaica on a Commonwealth Development scholarship. "The Figure of Crusoe" (which is published here in this collection for the first time) details Walcott's utilization of Robinson Crusoe as a literary symbol. Because of Crusoe's mixed accomplishments, his ambivalent existence as a castaway, Walcott sees him as more appropriate than Caliban as a paradigm of West Indian identity.

What "The Figure of Crusoe" suggests for Walcott's poetry, "Meanings" supplies for his early plays. Herein, he conceptualizes the elements of West Indian theater: an authentic creation with origins in Asian, African and oriental art forms but molded by western order and discipline. Ironically, Bertolt Brecht influenced him to reclaim disparate cultural fragments already available in his native West Indian environment and made him aware of the potential in classical Kabuki and Noh theater. By his own admission, *Malcochon* is based on Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. This play as well as his famous *Dream on Monkey Mountain* seek the physical assertion, the inarticulate directness of Japanese film ("Meanings" 48).[1]

"The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" addresses the vital questions inherent in his unapologetic assimilation of foreign influences. While well-meaning nationalists prefer racially pure art, Walcott insists on the authenticity of his complete New World identity. He accepts the central dilemma of his birth. Since inhabitants of the West Indies are descendants of transplanted African, Asian and European forebears, their ancestral roots are detached from modern Africa, China, Europe and India yet they may view their native island as alien soil. The choice of allegiances is highly charged — determining racial identity, political alignments, cultural values, even the language of expression. It is no wonder that many artists have preferred exile to this maelstrom.

Concluding this section of articles are two interviews. The first, conducted in Trinidad by Anthony Milne in 1982, inquires into Walcott's strained relationship with the Trinidad Theatre Workshop after he has taken up residence in the United States for several years. The second interview, by Edward Hirsch in 1986, touches on Walcott's personal and professional career including his friendship with such luminaries as Robert Lowell, Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney.

These selected reviews, essays and interviews render insights into Walcott's perspective on himself, his work and the world in which he writes; however, as informative and refreshing as his candor may be, it yields but one man's vision.[2] The modern distrust of an author's personal interests abetted by the revelations of psychological analysts, deconstructive critics and new historicists demand additional (if not equally biased) interpretations.

II The Critical Reception

The second division of this volume contains representative criticism of both Walcott's plays and his poetry. There is an overall chronological arrangement accord-

ing to a specific work's date of publication. Within this framework, Walcott's career is subdivided into four periods of development. Despite aesthetic and thematic links among all the plays and poems, there are distinguishable periods corresponding roughly with the four phases of his professional life from the late 1940s through 1990.

A. "The Divided Child" (1948-1959)

Walcott's juvenilia may well be said to extend into his first commercially published book, *In a Green Night* (1962), since it contains versions of some of his first poems. However, not only did those poems undergo extensive revision and editing, but a major portion of *In a Green Night* is reproduced in *Selected Poems* and belongs more properly among the work of the 1960s.

As should be expected, Walcott's earliest critics are close to home. Seven of the nine articles in the first subdivision come from regional periodicals: *Bim*, Barbados; *The Daily Gleaner*, Jamaica; *The Trinidad Guardian*. Frank Collymore, influential editor of *Bim* — and therefore a pioneering force in West Indian literature — recognized an "accomplished poet" in the nineteen-year-old author of *25 Poems*. He is also among the first to perceive the unmistakable lineage of Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas and Christian theology. Even closer to Walcott's origins, Harold Simmons points up his protege's sensual imagery, the elusiveness of his erudition, before citing vestiges of Rilke and Dylan Thomas in *25 Poems*. The only other poem covered from the 1940's is "Epitaph for the Young." In it, Keith Alleyne sees T. S. Eliot not as just an influence but rather a "complete formula."

Performances of the play "Henri Christophe" are assessed by Aubrey Douglas-Smith and G. A. Holder. For Douglas-Smith, it is important to find a West Indian writer making use of West Indian subject matter with valuable implications for indigenous people. Holder is attuned to audience response in his account of a group of peasants stopping to listen to a radio broadcast of the play.

In contrast with these basically favorable assessments of "Henri Christophe," two reviewers are highly critical of *Ione*. For Norman Rae, *Ione*, is an academic exercise, awkward in its Aristotelian conventions. Because of the way the playwright combines music, dance, atmosphere and style, Rae makes one observation that is prophetic for Walcott's evolving technique. Rae concludes, ". . . it seems a West Indian theatrical production of a straight play is no longer just a collection of persons making conversation on a platform" (115). John Grimes offers encouragement to a cast he sees struggling valiantly to overcome what is essentially melodrama.

Despite mixed and negative reviews, Walcott continues to experiment with material and styles, seeking a blend of theatrical conventions closer to West Indian experience. This leads to three folk plays — *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), inspired by J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea; Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1957); and *Malcochon* (1959), suggested by Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (Walcott, "Meanings" 48). Walcott's growing assurance and success are reflected by the inclusion of these plays in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1970), and by the fact that they continue to appear on stages internationally.

More extended articles by Albert Ashaolu and Theodore Colson indicate emerging critical awareness of Walcott's complexity. In "Allegory in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*," Ashaolu examines six layers of meaning and stresses linkages with Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. In "Derek Walcott's Plays: Outrage and Compassion," Colson argues that the juxtaposition of polar elements in *The Sea at Dauphin, Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, and *Malcochon* embodies the racial and cultural reality of post-imperial existence. Blackness, whiteness and their mixture are archetypal. By the time of this analysis in 1973, Colson enjoys the advantage of having seen the culmination of Walcott's assimilation process — the Obie award-winning *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

B. "The Estranging Sea" (1960-1969)

During the sixties the figure of outcast Crusoes is ubiquitous, whether in Walcott's first collection of plays with protagonists like Chantal (in *Malcochon*) or Makak (in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*) or in each of his four books of poetry: *In a Green Night, Selected Poems, The Castaway* and *The Gulf*. By 1960 Walcott is settled in Trinidad, having lived briefly in Kingston and New York. His travels serve only to confirm the validity and relevance of his West Indian experience.

Concomitant with Walcott's affirmation of native materials is the growing self-awareness of indigenous critics and their struggle toward authentic West Indian values. As a matter of fact, six of the seven critics representing coverage of Walcott's work during the sixties, are themselves West Indian (Robert E. Fox the exception). The first three authors, John Figueroa, Kenneth Ramchand and Mervyn Morris focus not only on Walcott's poetic text but also the difficult milieu within which he writes.

Figueróa and Ramchand elect close examination of individual poems. Drawing upon the linguistic mixture of "Tales of the Islands," Figueroa interprets the Creole/Standard tension Walcott exploits within the traditional sonnet form. Ramchand uses his explication of "Laventille" from *The Castaway* to complement other critics' easy generalizations regarding themes and trends. He explicates the poem to illustrate how interwoven themes, imagery, syntax and metrics compound meaning. As they illuminate Walcott's intricate verse, Figueroa and Ramchand also exercise their own ingenuity. While Walcott's verbal dexterity rewards careful study, it poses difficulties for unsophisticated readers. In "Walcott and the Audience for Poetry," Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris condemns the system of colonial education and moribund reviewers for inadequate grounding in younger, more "difficult" poets. He rejects Barbadian poet Edward Brathwaite's classification of Walcott as a "humanist," as opposed to a "folk," poet (because he allegedly directs himself away from the people). Morris argues that critics who accuse Walcott of addressing a foreign, elite audience are so obsessed with his style that they overlook the highly relevant content of his work:

> Poems which happen to be about death, love, evil, art, the loss of faith, are not relevant enough for those who find compassion or complex

> ambiguity decadent luxuries in our emerging society, and call instead for poems which speak stridently of politics, class and race. (Morris 178)

Analyzing poems in *The Castaway*, Morris emphasizes the greater particularity, tighter rhythm and increasing significance that result from Walcott's meticulous revisions. He detects richer complexity beneath a more natural-sounding simplicity in his newer verse. Walcott's experiments with non-standard usages even lead Morris to anticipate within dialect poetry greater potential than he had previously expected.

Both Morris and Walcott are realistic enough to know that not everyone will understand, much less respond to, serious poetry. The fact remains that Walcott's text yields meaning according to the reader's tenacity and powers of perception. His most famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a good example. Two essays, by Lloyd Brown and Robert Fox, take different approaches, yet they center on the play's dream element. Brown compares *Dream on Monkey Mountain* with Leroi Jones' *The Slave* (1964) to illustrate crucial parallels. Both plays are revolutionary, utilizing symbolism within fantasy sequences that are simply more explicit in Walcott's hands. Makak can then be used as an antidote for literalists who misinterpret Jones' implications.

Given the correspondences between the plays — the need for dreams and for revolutionary violence to rid the black man's psyche of self-hatred — Brown insists on the oneness of Caribbean and black-American experience. Interestingly, Brown uses Walcott, whose racial credentials are questioned by purists because of his Eurocentric style, to clarify the deeper meaning of *The Slave* which some critics dismiss as a "naïve and suicidal" race-war play authored by "an hysterical monomaniac" (Brown 194).

Robert Fox goes beyond racial implications in his study of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, asserting the mythological proportions of Walcott's drama. There is more to the play than the theme of imagination's power to redeem the downtrodden of the earth. Walcott uses the stage to dramatize "the disparities between a consciousness that is creative and metaphoric, and one that is straightforward and imprisoning" (Fox 204). Alter egos embodied in an apparition, in Moustique, and in Corporal Lestrade tempt the protagonist successively toward whiteness, blackness, materialism, then power and revenge. What is liberating about Makak's dream — collective and universalized according to Fox — is that he outgrows and throws off external values to return to himself. Rather than provide easy escape into a prescribed framework, the dream awakens Makak to personal roots.

Having begun coverage of this phase of Walcott's career with explications of two particular poems, I close with two surveys of his work culminating in *The Gulf* (1969). *The Gulf* brings out the ironic fact that isolation is the common denominator for all Walcott's castaways. The distance separating alien shores links individuals in a brotherhood of loneliness. Gordon Rohlehr reasons that after *In a Green Night* and *The Castaway*, imagery in the *The Gulf* indicates that Walcott's "vitality and inner affirmative music" are withering into a dryness of spirit. His themes of loneliness,

exile, and the chasms separating people may be overly internalized, leaving the poet too skeptical and too detached to remain a part of the West Indies.

Another consideration of Walcott's place in the Caribbean is Patricia Ismond's "Walcott Versus Brathwaite." Like Rohlehr, Ismond refers to Walcott's three main poetry collections from the sixties. The device of comparing Edward Brathwaite, a Barbadian "people's poet" with Walcott's Eurocentric humanism, provides more than a definition of the issues dividing two types of poetry. Ismond capitalizes on the opportunity to outline the strengths and weaknesses of conflicting aesthetics within the context of her emerging society. She concludes that although Walcott's is a personal quest, his insistence on self reliance is a broader, positive assertion, "not to be derivative and beholden, or to deem ourselves secondary in status" (235).

C. "Homage to Gregorias" (1970-1979)

The decade of the seventies confirms Walcott's West Indian roots and his conviction that these roots tap the deepest human resources. An autobiographical thread weaves through *Another Life*,(1972), the dialect poem "Sainte Lucie" in *Sea Grapes* (1976), the politically oriented *Remembrance* (1977) and *The Star-Apple Kingdom*,(1979). At the same time, Walcott dramatizes cultural affinities between modern Trinidad and 16th-century Spain in *The Joker of Seville* (1975), between Jamaica's Rastafarians and Ethiopia in *O Babylon!* (1976), then works a reversal of Daniel Defoe's Crusoe-Friday tandem in *Pantomime* (1978). All three of these plays are to some extent creolized musicals, incorporating more or less successfully such native forms as calypso and reggae.

Walcott draws details from his early years in St. Lucia for *Another Life* a veritable poetic "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"; yet he insists that he is recording the "biography of an 'intelligence,' a West Indian intelligence, using it in the Latin sense of spirit" (Hamner 411). Edward Baugh, who has written extensively on Walcott, demonstrates in "Painters and Painting in *Another Life*" the extent to which the structure and content of the poem depend on the visual arts. In painting, as in poetry, Walcott exhibits early inclinations toward the Renaissance. Counterbalancing these foreign leanings are the immediate influences of Harold Simmons and his childhood friend, the painter Dunstan St. Omer. As Baugh indicates, Walcott's perception of correspondences between 16th-century European creative vigor and St. Lucia's artistic awakening inspires much of the rich allusiveness of the poem.

On the stage, the Spanish Golden Age informs Walcott's *The Joker of Seville:* his adaptation of Tirso de Molina's classic *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1630). In "Breaking Myths and Maidenheads," Patricia Ismond delineates not only the striking parallels between Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tirso's Spain, but she analyzes the existentialism of Walcott's Don Juan character. Since she has viewed different runs of the play, she is in a position to report the effects of various technical changes for subsequent productions.

While Ismond approves the performances she has viewed, two separate reviewers react negatively to Walcott's treatment of Jamaica's Rastafarians in his next play, *O*

Babylon! Sharing part of the blame is Galt MacDermot who scored the lyrics for the two musicals. Both Victor Questel and Sule Mombara agree that the play fails to overcome the incompatible differences between metropolitan musical traditions and Rastafarian culture. The perceived weaknesses in idiom, music and acting lead Questel to hope that the play is merely an interlude in Walcott's progress and Mombara to argue that the dramatist needs to sink his roots among the people, to deliver messages that will alter his decaying society.

This kind of oversimplification is not likely to be taken seriously by Walcott since his aim is art rather than propaganda. Of course he delves into the society he knows, with all its complicated ambiguities. His next volume of poetry, *Sea Grapes* (1976), is a case in point. Edward Baugh's review "Ripening with Walcott" considers the book in light of Walcott's evolving style: the manner by which personal experience serves as an image of the human struggle against bitterness, corruption, and the ravages of age to achieve reconciliation. As Baugh points out, the central poem "Sainte Lucie" with its blend of languages, fuses the artist with the common people of Roseau Valley.

Although Walcott's next two plays, *Remembrance* (1977) and *Pantomime* (1978), are equally embedded in the West Indian scene, neither is as ambitious or extravagant as his previous musicals. Their reception in the West Indies has been favorable and a New York production of *Remembrance* starring Roscoe Lee Brown has received high marks from veteran *New Yorker*, critic Edith Oliver. Oliver's review is followed by Mark McWatt's report on a Barbados run of the play. His commentary on the director's innovative use of sets underscores the drama's rightful venue: live performance. The play is contemplative; yet it comes alive with humor, music and vivid representation of Trinidad's rancorous independence movement.

Since *Pantomime* is a tour de force on the classic *Robinson Crusoe* it possesses a unique literary element that goes beyond the basic stage script. Therefore, complementing Christopher Gunness' short review of a Port-of-Spain production, Patrick Taylor's close analysis of the play's narrative structure probes deeper relevance. Taylor argues that Walcott's reversal of the master-slave relationship constitutes a "liberating narrative." The creativity extends beyond "the authentic Creole appropriation of the classical traditions," avoids ethnic critics' demands that he forge a new "African mythology" and addresses the innermost needs of any degraded outcast. In this particular role transferal, the black man assists the white man to confront the reality beneath his delusions.

In a sense, the theme of this play and of major poems in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979) culminates Walcott's treatment of castaway figures in the seventies. Shabine, the "red nigger" poet-sailor of the opening poem "The Schooner *Flight*," celebrates his "nation of the imagination" in sure-handed dialect. The unnamed politician of the book's title poem comes to terms with his heritage while preparing his breakfast within the estate-house his ancestors could enter only as slaves. Two poets in their own right, Benjamin DeMott and Seamus Heaney are struck by the linguistic accomplishment of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. DeMott believes that Walcott's years of casual experimentation with dialect account for the range and grandeur of his language, although he still lapses occasionally into portentousness. Heaney, an Irish

expatriate, compares Walcott's accomplishment with that of John Millington Synge — the creation of a singular idiom capable of the most subtle expressiveness. DeMott and Heaney testify to the distance Walcott has traveled since his defense of cultural assimilation in introducing *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* in 1970.

D. "A Simple Flame" (1980-1990)

Despite laudatory reviews in major professional journals for over twenty years, critical opinion regarding each new collection always seems to divide over the individual critic's perception of Walcott's literary debt to predecessors. What is one reviewer's derivative reliance on the Jacobeans, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, or Robert Lowell is another reviewer's brilliant acquisition fused into a unique, personal voice. The pattern continues into the nineties where Walcott reaffirms his position on familiar issues, leading to the release of his *Collected Poems 1948-1984* and the epical *Omeros* (1990). A new development that becomes increasingly evident in recent works is his use of intertextuality itself as content. Two collections of verse in the eighties precede *Collected Poems*. Calvin Bedient condemns *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981) for being imitative and disproportionately verbose. Richard Dwyer, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with subject matter. He suggests that Walcott has played up the bifurcation in his nature so long that commentators often mistake his polarized subject matter for the poet's own self-conception. He defends the multiplicity of Walcott's voices as the poet merges them into his own idiom.

Reviewing *Midsummer* (1984), Sven Birkerts echoes Dwyer's reference to Walcott's "Ovidian gift": meaning that his "compressions, associations, and transformations appear effortless" (331). For Birkerts, Walcott's subject matter is not landscapes but words, "language becoming poetry." When he notices subtle linkages within *Midsummer*, he touches on the theme of Robert Bensen's detailed study "The Painter as Poet." Bensen is impressed with the particularity of Walcott's reliance on the visual arts for subject, imagery, light and color throughout *Midsummer*. Beyond that, he also traces significant changes in Walcott's relationship with painting since *Another Life*.

As may be expected, publication of *Collected Poems*, elicits overviews of Walcott's cumulative oeuvre. Concerning the early poems up to *Another Life*, Peter Balakian remarks on their modest intention. J. D. McClatchy brands them rhetorical, consciously derivative and literary. When he comes to *Another Life*, McClatchy finds the book to be one of the finest autobiographical poems in English. By the time of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, Balakian sees in Walcott the same capacity to revitalize and renew himself that characterizes Yeats, Neruda, and Rilke. Bruce King takes exception to a policy of selection that appears to emphasize universal themes and the mythology of Walcott's life, at the expense of "more topical, argumentative poems" (King 361).

In addition to his succinct coverage of *Collected Poems*, Bruce King's dual review also affords a transition into Walcott's second major publication of 1986: *Three Plays*, which includes *The Last Carnival*, *Beef, No Chicken* and *A Branch of the Blue Nile*.

Although *A Branch of the Blue Nile* dates back to 1983, *Beef, No Chicken,* dates back to 1981 and *The Last Carnival* dates back to the unpublished "In a Fine Castle" from 1970, King very properly argues that their collected versions conform to a "new phase of withdrawn, introspective, more traditional drama, directly rooted in Walcott's life and focused on the social realities of the post colonial West Indies" (King 367).

Single reviews hardly do justice to serious plays which, by their very nature, must vary with each production; nevertheless, there are informative reviews available which capture not only something of the immediacy of live performance but also the reviewer's frame of reference. Judy Stone, for example, managed to see a flawed premier of *Beef, No Chicken* in 1981, and later a markedly improved staging in 1985. She is witness, then, to specific authorial revisions and to the impact of a new director's interpretation. Bruce King indicates major revisions leading from "In a Fine Castle" to *The Last Carnival* and Trinidadian novelist/playwright Earl Lovelace analyzes a Port-of-Spain production of the play. Aside from the evaluation of acting and thematic content, Lovelace charges that the importation of American actors prevents native audiences from seeing their story dramatized by their own people. Walcott's response to just such concerns appears in his 1982 interview with Anthony Milne (59-60).

A Branch of the Blue Nile has been received favorably by audiences, but it demands special treatment because of the way in which it departs from Walcott's previous drama. In several of his later poems ("The Forest of Europe," "The Star-Apple Kingdom," "The Hotel Normandie Pool," "Marina Tsvetaeva"), and to some extent in *The Last Carnival,* Walcott seems to have begun experimenting with the interrelationship between the writing process and subject matter. His flirtation with this kind of intertextuality bursts into full bloom in *A Branch of the Blue Nile.* In Steven Breslow's words, the play literally "reverberates with reflexive consciousness of itself" (389).

The Arkansas Testament closes out the eighties in keeping with the internalized particularity of Walcott's recent work. Vernon Shetley refers once again to the paradox of a writer from the margins of English literature having acquired such an abundance of insight and expressiveness. Although he notes that Walcott has restrained much of his earlier rhetorical excess, Shetley contends he is still prone to elevate style over matter. Recognizing Walcott's maturation as an artist, Shetley echoes sentiments of critics throughout his career. It is ironic that having absorbed Western culture in a colonial outpost, Walcott persistently challenges the establishment to accommodate this West Indian phenomenon. Walcott's first entry in the nineties is no exception.

With the appearance of *Omeros* in 1990, Walcott undertakes nothing less than a modern adaptation of the time-honored genre of the epic. Although he confesses that as a youth he longed to continue the "line of Marlowe and Milton" ("What" 31), the sheer magnitude of such a project may account for his insistence that the poem is not actually an epic. Then again, perhaps his denial signifies a more radical agenda: redefining classical assumptions in a modern third world mode.

As J.D.R. Bruckner reviews *Omeros,* he quotes Walcott's contention that he wants

to avoid the "heroic" elevation of battles and warriors in order to emphasize inherently humble people. In keeping with that sentiment, Mary Lefkowitz focuses on the down-to-earth quality of the Narrative. The story advances in a spiral of memory and action which emulates thought processes. In the end, universal and personal, past and present are juxtaposed not in superhuman demigods but in natural, unassuming men and women. The definitive study of this monumental work remains to be written; however, its fundamental dimensions are readily apparent. Greeks, Romans, French, Italians, Germans, Spaniards, and Britons all have their national epics. Those of Dante and Milton may even be said to project Western culture as universal. Walcott's venue, while not that comprehensive, is international in scope.

In the tradition of his classical predecessors, Walcott adheres to the basic formula. Influences are frequently explicit and occasionally as unobtrusive as a familiar turn of phrase or parallel plot device. Characters may not be superhuman, yet they resonate extended cultural significance. Battles may not rise to Olympic heights, yet they determine the survival of an emerging race. The language of Walcott's sustained *terza rima* stanzas ranges from highly rhetorical periods to colloquial earthiness, not unlike the rising and falling cadences of Dante's *Divine Comedy.*

Other epic devices add their flavor: invocation of the muse, statement of theme, beginning *in medias res,* catalogs, formal speeches, communication with the dead. The supernatural intervenes through dreams, visions and the incantations of the old shamanMa Kilman. The past and the present are brought together episodically as the progeny of Europe and Africa carve out their New World identity. The list of comparisons could go on; however, despite the formal similarities, Walcott offers new perspectives, a re-writing of tradition.

What is unique about Walcott's epic is not so much the particular geographic montage or the lowly station of his characters. The outstanding feature of his creation is its reflexive consciousness. Like Dante, Walcott participates in his own Narrative, occasionally addressing the audience more or less directly. But beyond that, he plays with the intertextuality of autobiography and fiction, the postmodern recognition of words and margins as poetic content.

On the literal plane, the story concerns a Caribbean Helen who inspires two interconnected Narrative lines. One recounts the contest between West Indian fishermen, Achille and Hector, for her hand. The second involves British expatriate Major Dennis Plunkett's ambition to give Helen a history of her own. On the figurative level, the story uses Helen as the embodiment of Walcott's native island, St. Lucia. Whether they are descendants of African slaves or representatives of declining empire, the author and the protagonists ultimately discover that through their efforts to possess metaphorical Helen, the real island asserts its possession of them.

It is St. Lucia's place in the larger struggle among European powers for control of the New World that gives Walcott all the reason he needs to synthesize Greek and African mythology as they wash up on West Indian shores. The pervasive motif of the poem is closure. Whether it be the letter "O," mouths of poets, vases, caves, conch shells, statues or lovers, the shoreline of an island surrounded by ocean, the circuit of

sea swifts or peasant fishermen out to sea and back each day, the journeys of various characters, past and present — all the dominant imagery of the poem suggests circular completion. Achille loses, then regains Helen. Plunkett learns to appreciate Helen as the living woman rather than as a symbol.

Walcott has not essayed the epic of African diaspora any more than he has assumed the guise of a black Homer. In "The Muse of History," Walcott rejects the epic of the tribe which needs forgotten gods and a dead speech based on shame or revenge. He argues, "The epic poem is not a literary project. It is already written; it was written in the mouths of the tribe, a tribe which courageously yielded its history: (8-9). *Omeros* is his epic of the dispossessed, regardless of nationality or race.

When I speak of Walcott's uniqueness, I am not suggesting that he stands alone. He has his peers and several masters. What is original in Walcott is the use he makes of his manifold voice, his particular combination of imagination and experience. For a poet often given to confessional verse, he is remarkably other-oriented. Even in passages where he is most topical, he translates personal immediacy into human insight. Walcott has maintained his right to diverse cultures so consistently that he might well embody the ideal expounded in T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot describes a depersonalized artist with an historical sense that enlightens his contemporaneity well beyond any reference to self or cause (49). In poetry, as on stage, Derek Walcott rewrites tradition, expanding and renewing in the most profound sense of the word. Perhaps the crowning recognition of this achievement is his Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded in December 1992.

Endnotes

[1] Hereinafter, page references to articles that are reprinted in this *Critical Perspectives* volume apply to pagination within this present book. References to all outside sources observe pagination of their original publication.

[2] In reproducing the ten items for section one, occasional errors may be indicated by [sic]. Typographical matters, such as diacritical markings and the presence or absence of italics, are left as in the original publication.

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I

WALCOTT, ARTIST AND CRITIC

SOCIETY AND THE ARTIST (1957)

Derek Walcott

Where history is being made now, in these islands, is not in the quick political achievements, not in the large agricultural schemes, but in the deepening stream of the way we are now learning to think. To see ourselves, not as others see us, but with all the possibilities of the new country we are making.

Naturally, when we think of our independence we think in political terms. We will point to the riots we won and the other actions which are so natural now that it seems difficult to imagine that we did not always have them.

Whether we are socially different, and whether our racial hatreds still smoulder inside, the people of all these islands know that they must share their countries. They may think of minorities, or of the large, backward mass of people, Indians and Negroes, but they do not think principally of race. They are now a people who possess the land in thought and share it.

All except the inevitable minority, their artists. I do not think that there is any minority in the entire archipelago with more pride in the islands, with a deeper love for their roots, with a more anguished sense of a people's suffering and progress, than the old men and their younger inheritors, who think that they write for themselves, who long for the metropolitan centres of civilization, temporarily conquer them, and then yearn for more than the sunlight and the sea. They know where they are planted, and know where they should like to die.

Some of them, like Mais, Dunkey and Daley died when the praise came late or not at all.

When they are dead, they are blessed with the usual ironic praise of the safer ones, who are glad to have them silent. Their violently public statements of love of country, whether in pamphlet, rum-shop, or drawing room, whether aesthetic or in politics has always been embarrassing. But nothing has been more valuable than the honest cursing of abuses which they could not stand or prevent. Their names must be kept alive until their work has settled as part or our tradition.

But after we have turned from the safe dead, we face some of those who are stupid enough to follow in the paths of self-destruction and isolation. They are those whom

we say we cannot help. Perhaps we cannot. They are the voices which the Government cannot hear, since nothing can make a government uncomfortable in a democracy. When the democratic government is disturbed, it is hearing the total voices of its own conscience. It is not disturbed when a painter or a writer succumbs to despair, suffers continual frustration and abuses its lack of patronage.

It is not like begging, for the state must look after beggars, it does not have to feed every ranting idiot who claims his indispensable genius. The only difficulty is that until they are dead we feel that we cannot know. Their lives must follow the romantic pattern of neglect, mockery and inbreeding argument.

Year after year, these men remain. They remain because they are not in search of environment. The land-scape is their home. They are not in search of better jobs, like the emigrants, because Europe is tougher, and they can work more comfortably here.

They are urged to remain, and these islands kill them. They are killed by acclaim without cash, praise without purchase, killed by too much drinking which like the praise of friends bloats and distends their ego. They are killed by the humiliation of borrowing from people who always knew they would never mean anything. They are tortured by the insistence with which amateur expatriates and returned dilettantes tell them of the work that is done or has been done in Europe. What is worse they are swamped by the amateurs who prefer posture to the serious discipline that must be acquired.

In a sense, every artist is on his own. But it is the most difficult profession in the world to be on your own when you are, if you are any good, the property of this world and not of the next.

The poets know the hopelessness of the situation. A man writes probably two good poems a year, and that by the finest standards is plenty. For a poem of reasonable length, he will be paid a half guinea locally. This does not pay for the poem, but it is called a gesture. He then loses his property to the publisher, or the newspaper. If he is an honest poet, he will print only the poems which succeed. As an honest working man, he will have earned perhaps four pounds a year, and it is pretty certain that he will do any other work reluctantly.

It seems better sometimes to agree with Plato, who chased artists out of his ideal community, or to have a petition in verse presented to the Almighty to please stop making poets, as people do not know what to do with them.

There is no serious West Indian artist, painter or poet, who would not prefer to say something of his country than of a view of Venice. Europe does not belong to them. But they still live in a green culture where, unless they are camouflaged in grey flannel suits, or sell insurance, or pretend that they are happy Civil Servants who are simply dying to own a new Chevrolet, they are not pleasant to have around.

There is not a good publisher in the islands. There is one art dealer in Jamaica. There is no true theatre building in the entire archepelago, and you will hear popular talk about Elizabethans and new Greeks. There is no such thing as a real collector or patron of the plastic arts, but hotels change hands every day.

Scholarships which our artists receive are given by foreign governments, if you can call the British government foreign, and these, only when their work has won merit or been printed in the scholarship's country of origin.

There are no schools for actors, no theatres, no backers of plays, and they will talk about a national theatre.

Nobody buys paintings because they know the artists drink too much, or talk too much about themselves, or detest criticism, but they talk about the inevitable gaiety of West Indian art. No one will print verse and who can blame them.

Consequently they pack their manuscripts and head for Europe. In two years they are acclaimed and their work has all the vigour of a fresh memory, all the style of years of isolation, all the beauty of nostalgia, and then the deterioration begins, and the fog closes around the memory.

They are rootless, and then they teach themselves to deny the loves which they had earliest and the faith which perhaps their own communities made them betray.

Our artists and writers should not be forced, like soldiers to die on foreign soil, or to return wounded and crawl famously into a hole. They are part of what can be one of the finest and most beautiful of countries. I mean these islands. Without them Greece would have been a Tourist resort, and these island will be beautiful but dumb.

HISTORY AND PICONG . . . IN THE MIDDLE PASSAGE (1962)

Derek Walcott

If there ever were, there are no earthly paradise [sic] left. Those picturesque archipelagoes, the West Indies and the South Sea Islands, have for their moral and financial improvement been captured by UNESCO guerillas, international hoteliers, tourists, anthropologists, religious sects and travel writers.

Marshes, mosquitoes and seedy expatriates of Greene and Maugham are passing away with the nineteenth century, which in those far-flung outposts is a long time dying. Yet the best travel books have been by these nineteenth century writers who could look at the filthy backyards of the Empire with a proprietary and corrective eye.

None of them knew that their eye was that of the auctioneer; that, less than a century later, another nineteenth century relic would refuse to preside over the dissolution of their Empire. They saw history and the destiny of the white man steadily and whole, as logical in direction as a Roman road.

Those tours of Empire, taken as if by carriage by parsonical zealots like Trollope, Froude and Kingsley concern themselves with the climate more than with the people and with people more than the individual. This is natural, since they wrote for their own time.

It is curious to find however, that possibly our best West Indian novelist, Mr. V.S. Naipaul, has chosen to do our Grand Tour, Trinidad, Guiana, Martinique, Surinam, Jamaica, with his Victorian spectacles on, and that in his "Impressions of Five Societies, British, French and Dutch, in the West Indies, and South America," he has given us a number of idyosyncratic, neo-classical engravings of these societies.

Every experience is bent to his style, historical judgments made in mannered aphorisms, and the writing once again is brilliant. It is the result that is doubtful. Everything is made to seem touching and ridiculous. The people he encounters have an antic, desperate pathos. More often they are vulgar and we can imagine Mr. Naipaul recoiling in terror from their exuberance.

The benefit of style is that it can conceal emotion, and in the hand of an excellent ironist like Mr. Naipaul little will be revealed of the vulgar emotions like homesickness, love or disgust. It is a case of history versus the aphorist, landscape versus art, compassion versus wit. It produces strange contradictions:

"How can the history of this West Indian futility be written?" Mr. Naipaul writes: "What tone shall the historian adopt? The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation: and nothing was created in the West Indies. . ." Nothing? Come, come, Naipul. V. S., know your literature, how about "A House for Mr. Biswas?"

"Sir, that book was not created in the West Indies."

"Where was it created?"

"In England, sir."

"My apologies, again. You may sit down, Naipaul. And don't smile before ah make George Lamming hold you!"

The difference in viewpoint between Lamming's "The Pleasures of Exile" and "The Middle Passage" is striking. For all his occasional incoherence Lamming is a visionary, which means that his despair is profound, closer to anger and translatable into action. Naipaul, a neater writer, is reflective, more weighed down by the sense of the past, not by the chains of slavery but by a chronic dispiritedness. It makes his book depressing. The flashing wit shines like a mirror in a rubbish heap.

I become uncomfortable when a people or a race are a source of infinite amusement or benign tolerance to a writer, even such a gentle humorist as Mr. Naipaul, and his mixture of history and picong, however exotic is a forgettable recipe.

He has chosen some striking ingredients of our society and pointed out how tasteless they are: the society columns of our newspapers are cunningly ridiculed, the worst aspects of our 'Americanisation,' the belligerence of our humour, Negro churlishness. East Indian apathy, canned coffee, tourists, stray dogs and noise, including folk-art and steelbands. On the other hand he must prefer things as they are, since they are rich resources for the satirist.

The section on Trinidad, with which he deals with affectionate loathing, is the best part of his book. Despite its flavour of "An Englishman's Guide To The Colonies," it stings with the home truths of a family quarrel. Like any such catharsis, it draws him nearer to us.

But it is not near enough to hatred, to that holy rage which a great exile like Joyce poured on Dublin, or to the savage indignation of Swift. It is more like a supercilious pat on the head, or a friendly volley of insults. But, as Mr. Naipaul must know, it is hard to insult a West Indian subtly. We like we noise.

NECESSITY OF NEGRITUDE (1964)

Derek Walcott

The fact that neither Aime Cesaire nor Leopold Senghor, two major poets of our time, are included in a volume I own called "The Concise Encyclopaedia of Modern World Literature", (although Amos Tutuola is registered), may illustrate the necessity of "Negritude".

There is a concept of language and literature as being white that on one hand divides writers racially — anthologies of Negro poetry for example, are becoming popular — and which on the other claims that art is universal.

The division has spread to popular art forms like jazz, which is now exclusively claimed by the American Negro as his "soul music", and it is an assertion that has impelled a great deal of "separatist" poetry.

Many Negro poets are conducting an experiment in racial self-analysis which involves finding those qualities in their personality which they consider distinctive from those of the white writer. This sort of poetry has led to an emphasis on certain modes which the Negro formerly resented when they were applauded by the white spectator or reader; rhythms, simplicity, "barbarism," splendour.

It is the opposite of the integration movement. A great deal of modern Negro poetry and prose belligerently asserts its isolation, its difference, and sometimes its psychic superiority.

Yet it is extremely difficult to create a natural poetry that is technically identifiable as Negro without distorting language or feeling, and most Negro poets writing in English arrive at a point where to progress technically, to develop complexity of structure appears like treachery, a betrayal of the cause.

It is more artificial when the Negro in the Western World, so long cut off from Africa, with his language, religion, customs and politics an entirely different experience, attempts to force a fusion.

As Eliot once wrote, "you gotta use words," and the words he uses, to stretch the point to absurdity, are the white man's words.

So, in the Western World, are his God, his dress, his machinery, his food. And, of course, his literature.

In the West Indies the most powerful expression of Negritude has come from Cesaire, whose poem "Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal" has only now begun to have an influence on the writers and intellectuals of the Caribbean.

But Cesaire's great poem is not so much a work of protest of exaltation: it is a work of magnificent optimism, one that goes higher in feeling than the paternalistic, cataloguing of Whitman.

His riposte to the usual claim that Negroes have contributed little or nothing to the progress of the world is:

> "Hurrah for those who never invented anything
> "Hurrah for those who never explored anything
> "Hurrah for those who never conquered anything
> "But who, in awe, gave themselves up to the essence of things. . ."

And further on, he proclaims:

> "But preserve me, heart, from all hatred
> do not turn me into a man of hate whom I shall hate
> for in order to emerge into this unique race
> you know my worldwide love,
> know it is not hatred against other races —
> that turns me into the cultivator of this one race
> for what I want
> arises from infinite hunger
> from infinite thirst
> finally to demand them to be free,
> freely in their secluded soul
> to create the ripening fruit."

This is a West Indian poem, and its subject is race as openly, though with much more complexity of expression, as the Guadeloupean poet, Saint John Perse's "Eloges" or "Pour Feter Un Enfance" is about being a white child in the tropics.

The two poems make an interesting contrast, but their resemblances, their primal sources are very alike. They are separated from the poetry of Senghor by an entire experience, by geography and by traditions.

Senghor is an African poet and the mythology from which he writes is one that is part of him. For Cesaire it is a nostalgia, a legend, a number of intuitions which he gives shape.

Ulli Beier, that arduosu, [sic] white German publicist of Negritude has written on "The Theme of The Ancestors in Senghor's Poetry," that:

"Those African poets who most strongly assert their Negritude, are often the most sophisticated and — on the surface at least — the most assimilated Africans.

One might ask oneself therefore, whether this new proclamation of 'Negritude' is a genuine rediscovery of African attitudes and values in the poet's soul, or whether it

is merely a deliberate, self-conscious intention, a kind of cultural manifesto. Since 'Negritude' has become a kind of literary and cultural movement, some people will no doubt suspect that if Senghor makes use of Balafongs and Khalams in this poetry when he speaks of the princess of Elissa and the night of Mahgreb when he envisages the Lamantines drinking at the source and the procession of the dead on the beach — that all these are merely picturesque trappings intended to provide atmosphere and an African flavour to his poetry. . . ."

Herr Beier, in this penetrating article (*Black Orpheus* No. 5. May, 1959), proves that the poetry of Senghor is a natural exhalation of tribal mythology, that, for example, the African veneration of ancestors, its ritual pieties, in fact, its "joy" in the presence of the dead, is not European, in fact, the dead opposite of the Hebraic-Christian attitude.

German excavators like Herr Beier and Mr. Janheinz Jahn, author of "Muntu" have done some valuable definition of the African personality.

Sometimes their enthusiasm carries them to the frontiers of the absurd, as when Herr Jahn praises Selvon for the African quality of his story telling.

Two English-educated poets, the Nigerians John Pepper Clark and Wole Soyinka have ridiculed the idea of Negritude as a poetic principle, Mr. Soyinka's remark about the tiger not going around proclaiming its tigritude already becoming famous.

It is significant that the assertion has come from those islands, and countries formerly ruled by the French, since the French process of assimilation in its colonies has been very different from the non-interference of the British. Negritude, like Presence Africaine, are French concepts, just as the surrealism of Perse—and Cesaire come from the genus of that language.

It is a language that is flexible to ideas, to abstraction, to a philosophy-poetry, and its qualities in prosody are different from English. There has never been a good surrealist poet in English, whereas in the Romance languages, in Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, surrealism has flourished.

Neruda, Lorca, and Cesaire, are to a fair degree, untranslatable.

In Senghor's poetry it has been pointed out that the symbols, the materialised concepts that he uses have votive, totemic, magical use. Because of this, because of its incantatory use, its function of poetry as ritual, its quality hardly comes over in English.

The mnemonic use of words, of naming things and blessing them by naming, is something which has gone out of English, since it is possible that the more complicated in syntax a language becomes the more its original impulses, worship and communication weaken.

Although Senghor writes in French, he writes as an African who is putting that language to a particular, restricted use, the ancient, tribal one of the poet as an oracle. He himself has requested a poetry whose tone is monodic, recitation accompanied by traditional African instruments.

In this way he has tried to restore, even if it is through an intellectualisation of the process, poetry to its right place, to the language of the tribe.

For us, whose tribal memories have died, and who have begun again in a New

World, Negritude offers an assertion of pride, but not of our complete identity, since that is mixed and shared by other races, whose writers are East Indian, white, mixed, whose best painters are Chinese, and in whom the process of racial assimilation goes on with every other marriage.

But both the concepts of Negritude and the assertion of the African personality have restored a purpose and dignity to the descendants of slaves.

In the art of poetry, it has shown, through the translations of Senghor, Cesaire, and Perse, a freer, more natural expression, one that need not confine itself in the dated rigidities of certain forms, but which will demand its own discipline and power.

In this way, the poetry of Senghor may be assimilated into the experiment of not only a West Indian language, but of a West Indian personality, one in which all our races are powerfully fused.

DEREK WALCOTT (1982)

Anthony Milne

Derek Walcott was in Trinidad last week. While here he gave a reading at the Royal Victoria Institute, and met with members of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop who are to produce his play, "The Joker of Seville", later this year.

Walcott was staying, as is his wont, at the Hotel Normandie, and when EXPRESS feature writer Anthony Milne went to see him he was lounging by the pool. The interview was conducted beneath a poolside umbrella until the wind and the rain made this impossible. The rest of the interview took place in Walcott's hotel room, in between interviews with members of the Theatre Workshop.

EXPRESS: What is it like living in the United States, and what are you doing there?

WALCOTT: I used to teach in a university there one term, or semester, at a time. I was making my living that way. Of course, the money was rapidly consumed; whatever I saved went very quickly while I was in Trinidad. I was living in hotels while I was here. I decided last year, having got an offer from Boston University, that I would take a permanent job there because it would involve the reality that my children would get a free university education.

Just to try to create a kind of continuity I thought I would take the job for a period of time and test it and see how long I wanted to remain there. Then I got the MacArthur award, which is a good amount of money, and one has to live in a place that is one's own, so I got a place in Boston quite near to the university.

But I genuinely consider that I have a kind of even balance, geographically and even mentally now between the United States and Trinidad, or the Caribbean, because another place I like to go to in summer, I do a workshop up there, is St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. I run a playwrights' workshop there, and I'm going to go back there this summer with my daughters, to do a combined work-vacation type of thing.

Then, of course, I'm here in Trinidad during the vacations, and the summer vacation is quite long, beginning at the end of May and continuing till the first week in September. I am very active. There are a lot of things I plan to do here, with the theatre particularly.

Since I have got this grant from the MacArthur Foundation, and since the grant included $36,000 annually to be used by any institution I associate myself with, that sum will go, on alternate years, to Boston University and to the Trinidad Theatre Workshop.

So I think I have achieved a kind of balance which I have sought for a long time. I'm not doing enough, and one needs a hell of a lot more money, but this whole question of exchanging talent, which I am continuing with, is not just for my sake; it's something that needs to be done. The actors here need to have fresh professional actors come down to work with them. And the actors who come down from New York, or wherever, will also benefit from the experience of coming to the Caribbean.

EXPRESS: Who now constitute the Theatre Workshop?

WALCOTT: Just recently Albert La Veau was appointed to be a new director of the workshop, and there is evidently going to be a new board. I created the workshop, but I'm not in it, I'm outside of it, so that's where the interest lies. There is also an executive board, and also a board of trustees which has to be there before the grant can be administered.

But what I want to do in a broader sense, if it's possible (and this is where one can test whether there is any guided philanthropy in Trinidad), if that $36,000 goes to the workshop, which is quite likely, then what will be necessary, to ensure there is enough money for a solid programme, are matching grants either from the government or from business people. Because generally the situation has always been that you go and beg and so on, and there have been instances of people endorsing things, and signs that they will do so again. But if you have that initial sum, from the grant, you can go to people and ask whether they will match the amount, and that way you can find out if people are really interested in developing the theatre here; the arts on the whole.

I'm not saying that there has been no funding in the past, but at times the funding is minimal (it certainly has been sporadic), and sometimes it has been overblown. In other words there has been immense investment in things that are basically ephemeral. Over the next five years during which that grant is administered, I want to get people to come down here.

I have spoken to some very important actors and directors in America who say they will come down. Lloyd Richards, who is the artistic director and Dean of the Yale Drama School, will be coming down in the summer to do a ten-day master-class in acting. I've spoken to another American director who did a play of mine; and I've also spoken to a world-renown[ed] actress, a terrific actress, I won't tell you her name now, because the thing is still being negotiated, and there are a couple other people who will come down to help create this widening, mutual area of experience.

It is about time the experience of the theatre here be expanded, and certainly it shouldn't contract itself racially. That is a danger here as well. You can see that there is almost beginning to be a division in terms of colour in the theatre. People may say I'm talking nonsense, but I'm watching it and I think that the more nationalistic you get, because of the nature of the bulk of the population here, the more the thinking

may tend to be only in black or in Indian, and that is not what the West Indies is supposed to mean, or Trinidad certainly.

So I'm talking about white actors too. I'm not interested in making a black theatre in the Caribbean, absolutely not, because that would exclude everybody, apart from the black.

EXPRESS: Do you know about the controversy over the role of theLittle Carib Theatre?

WALCOTT: Yes, that is a complicated question. I suppose I'm skirting the question, but let me say that I think that one of the problems is that this country is a very small place, and the biggest danger here is for people to self-inflate their reputations, and to become disproportionately blind about what is really valuable. I find that increasingly frightening, and distressing. It's all around. Very inexperienced people who may have zeal (which in itself is allright) but whose zeal gets transformed into very large egos, can do a lot of damage in terms of restraining or misdirecting certain things.

This is a place where if you just get something published a couple of times you are automatically a poet; if you write a play you are a playwright; if you go on the stage you are an actor. Because of nationalism, because of this greed to have an identity that is purely Trinidadian, with the loss of the sense of patience and building that is necessary in any craft, people have overblown reputations, and tend after a while to believe in their own reflections.

I think it's all around now. I have come back here and seen people's names billed as stars, and I'm talking about totally inexperienced young actors. I've seen directors' names put above the names of authors; so that playwrights established worldwide get second billing. It's insanity, and it looks foolish, because I have had friends down here, professional theatre people, and it makes us look damn silly, that's all I'm saying. There's some sanity required to get back into a modesty of discipline and direction that has been derailed by this inflation of egos here.

I go through a hell of a lot in terms of this kind of thing. I've just had two plays done in America that have got very bad reviews and these are sobering experiences. Down here my reputation is big, but when I'm in America I'm among other people who can be sliced in a review the next day, so I always have that chastening experience of knowing I'm not finished working. A lot of people here have the feeling that in six months' time they can become actors or directors or producers. I think that's the worst aspect of things here now.

EXPRESS: There was an article about Vidia Naipaul in last Sunday's EXPRESS which was perhaps evidence of the kind of thing you are talking about. The writer joined in the criticism of both Naipaul and yourself, apparently because you don't always say the things a certain kind of person likes to hear. It seems as though that type of person feels he must revile those who, by international standards, are the finest literary products of the region.

WALCOTT: I don't think that is of any importance whatsoever, because no matter what is said in terms of being criticised locally, it is expected. You have a village mentality, and if you walk down a village street dressed differently you get people heckling you at a street corner. So when you encounter a village mentality you ignore

it, otherwise you would never work. And a village mentality can exist on an official level, on very responsible levels. It still remains a village mentality.

Certainly anyone can say what they want about Naipaul, in terms of his philosophy or his attitude to Trinidad, but it is impossible to degrade him as an artist, because the work is there. So that is only village jeering and is of absolutely no consequence; that is just standpipe criticism.

EXPRESS: Would you say that this kind of thing, this attitude, and the danger of assuming an inflated ego makes it difficult for a person who is trying to become a serious writer or artist in Trinidad?

WALCOTT: In days gone by, and this may seem like nostalgia because I am 52, a different kind of thing happened. There were values in the colonial system of education, and the colonial system of hierarchy that were over-turned with independence, but people revert to them. One of the obvious symptoms of hierarchy is the hierarchy of language.

If you live in a society in which bad language (and by bad I don't mean immoral, but ill-expressed language) is acceptable not only as a norm but as an expression of Patriotism (so that if you don't speak badly you become an enemy of the people, because the people don't talk that way) you get a deterioration of syntax. A deterioration of syntax is related to the threat of deterioration in a society. Because the next thing that happens is that anyone with any talent or with any ambition is called a showoff, because there is an attempt to force that person to become democratic.

But art is not democratic, art is hierarchical, and all artists know that. They know that it takes all your life to achieve some level where you can be among your peers. But if immediately your peers are made to be illiterate, or the people who feel education is restricted entirely to self-expression without craft, then the society is in danger. It is in more danger than it is from terrorists or revolutionaries.

But I think the standard of education here, just from speaking to my daughters, is high, it remains high. That is one good aspect of the colonial heritage. We mustn't look on colonialism simply as oppression, there are certain things in it that, however irascible they make some people, form the basis of the kind of democratic society that exists here. It is not a matter of race. It is a matter of racelessness, really.

For us to teach art as race, which is typical independence type of thinking, that will go away. Because I don't think anyone is going to prevent the artist from having a universal type of mind. But I will say again that I think the standard of education here remains high, because it depends on the severe discipline of studying, which I think is good.

EXPRESS: It seems that what you are saying is that there is sometimes a confusion between colonial standards and standards which are universal; that people reject a certain standard saying that it is colonial, when it is important to maintain that standard.

WALCOTT: Yes, or they make the silly mistake of confusing race with culture. Now I'm not saying that colonial culture is the only culture. I am saying that the exclusion of good speech, the exclusion of books, of art, or whatever, as a sort of historical revenge, as a revenge on history, is very short-sighted, and is fatal.

The question of emphasing [sic] an African or Indian identity is irrelevant, because

you are African or you are Indian and no one can take that away in terms of identity. To exclude yourself, like some other Third World countries would do, to think that everything there is tainted and poisoned, is immature.

EXPRESS: So that the same way that the primitive Britons benefited from Roman Colonialism?

WALCOTT: Exactly. The whole process of civilization is cyclical. The good civilization absorbs a certain amount, like the Greeks. Empires are smart enough to steal from the people they conquer. They steal the best things. And the people who have been conquered should have enough sense to steal back.

EXPRESS: But is there a difference between Roman-British colonialism and British-West African colonialism because of greater racial differences in the latter?

WALCOTT: Colonialism is often based on race. You are going out there to subdue heathen races, and so on. But it isn't always based on race, it isn't always that you are subduing the heathen, although you have to think of people as heathen. It depends on how much power exists at the moment, in the empire. For example, when Britain invaded India it was invading a civilisation older than its own.

All of what is called the Third World is now confronted by this crisis of restoration. The Moslem thing that Naipaul talks about in his recent book, though it is not a very profound book, but one of the things it talks about is the extreme and frenzied rejection of everything Christian in Islamic countries; that's not what you want.

To be told by politicians, or by critics, or by anyone at all, or by Naipaul himself (this is where he contradicts himself), that you are imitating is odd. On the one hand you say embrace, and on the other you say don't imitate. But you cannot embrace without imitation. The trouble with it is that when the empire does it, it is known as acquisition and when it is done by colonials it is known as imitation. The amorality of that is absurd.

My main concern is not with any political refutation of the past, but with the reality of the day to day experience of language and literature, and so on. I think that the situation here is almost obscene in the fact that there isn't a good library still, and other things. All those things that should be there.

These things are not false. It isn't that you are putting up the structure and hoping to fill it. The point is that you have the personnel, you have the people, you have the enthusiasm, the drive, you have the reality of people's becoming; but what you don't have is those moulds to contain and shape that expression. What you do have, unfortunately, is a government, which has been re-elected, that is not going to suddenly get a new vision of the situation.

It may be that their vision will broaden and they will see the obvious need for certain things which one has been crying out for a quarter of a century. I am not cynical any more. I am just resigned to the fact that I don't expect anything to be done. But that does not mean that I don't have the faith that another generation of people will insist on their right to have civic buildings where they can express themselves: museums, theatres, and so on. Another generation is going to make damn sure they get these things.

EXPRESS: With regard to what you were saying about language and its deterioration, does that have to do with the way in which language and thought are connected, in that subtlety of thought needs subtlety of language?

WALCOTT: It is hard to measure that, but I don't think you can say that a thought is more subtle in an imperial language than it is in a colonial dialect. I know a feeling cannot be. I think that artists have acute, more accentuated, more mercurial feelings, because they train their minds towards this daily. They become oversensitive and more receptive.

But the average person in one culture is not more sensitive than the average person in another culture, because the same experiences go through each culture, whether it is death or fear, just to take the large ones. In terms of subtleties of feeling no man is different from another man.

The acuteness of the artist in terms of representing or experiencing those feelings is a difference, definitely. But you cannot be an artist without the discipline of thought, and that discipline of thought must be within a structure of language. That structure of language may begin in dialect, originate in dialect.

I don't think we have as yet managed to express fully the subtleties that are possible in dialect. They have been expressed, but as a generic thing, as a large thing. You have the kind of dialect writing that is h[u]morous or satirical, which pretends to be nationalistic, but which [is] really poking fun at itself. You also have, as with Naipaul or Selvon, artists working in the language and making some masterful little variations in the language. So that it is there.

But to say that when someone is writing a dialect story that person is thinking in the imperial language, I don't know if that's true. I think that the confidence you have in the language is that you are saying that one is no better than the other. It's like Dante writing "The Divine Comedy" in the vulgar tongue, or Chaucer, or Joyce, or Synge.

EXPRESS: But what about the other functions of language, in philosophy, for example?

WALCOTT: Well, the language in art is the language that is used in schools. And unless we look very carefully and realise, for instance, that the diction of teachers in schools cannot be tolerated purely as being nationalistic diction. In other words, to mispronounce words, to say "de" instead of "the" is not a nationalistic thing.

It is crippling and limiting the width of a child's mind if at an early age what is correct speech (and there is no question about what is correct speech, correct speech is agreed upon by what grammar is) we are talking about schools principally. And if the subtlety of a philosophical thought contradicts itself in dialect then you have no confidence in the dialect and you have more confidence in the imperial language, the source of the language.

So that whole problem is centred in education, because every artist either is self-educated to the same degree that he was his own teacher, very rigidly, or he had a formal education in which he was trained by teachers who had enough confidence to be what they were.

EXPRESS: Do you think that syntactical breakdown is part of a process by which something new may be formed?

WALCOTT: Certainly, because that happens with the artist; but what I'm saying

is that the artist has the duality of confidence in either language. If Naipaul wants to write a dialect story, like "Tell Me Who To kill," which is a little masterpiece, he does that, then he does another kind of story, in English. He can choose either tool he likes. But when you have someone else who is not a writer, or an artist, patriotically affirming that this is our language then just purely as an academic exercise, for the sake of an examination, or for the sake of getting a job, beginning to treat English as some kind of device by which one can advance oneself, purely for that reason, then you are limiting what I still think is the range of the West Indian experience. Which is world-wide range. It's like teaching bad Hindu, or Hebrew, or Swahili.

EXPRESS: In spite of all the attendant problems, how do you feel about living and working in Trinidad again.

WALCOTT: My whole thing about Trinidad is that it is more enriching, however embittering or degrading or frustrating sometimes. It is a richer experience for me to be in Trinidad than it is to be in America. The challenge of the experience of what it means to be at the beginning of a society is more exciting than to be in one that is too large to influence, to help direct. As I explained, I think I have achieved a balance between being in the United States and Trinidad.

THE ART OF POETRY (1986)

Edward Hirsch

I went to visit Derek Walcott on his home island of St. Lucia in mid-June, 1985. St. Lucia is one of the four Windward Islands in the eastern Caribbean, a small mountainous island which faces the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other. For a week Walcott and I stayed in adjacent bungalows, called "Hunt's Beach Cottages," just a few miles from the harbor city of Castries where he was born and raised. Outside of our large, mildly ramshackle cottages, a few stone tables and chairs were cemented into a strip of grass; beyond was a row of coconut trees and then, just a few yards away, what Walcott has called "the theater of the sea," the Caribbean. One is always aware of the sea in St. Lucia—an inescapable natural presence which has deeply affected Walcott's sense of being an islander, a new world poet.

Derek Walcott was born in 1930. He was educated at St. Mary's College in St. Lucia and at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. For many years he lived in Trinidad—he still spends most of his summers there—where from 1959 to 1976 he directed the Trinidad Theater Workshop. Since then he has spent much of his time in the United States, living first in New York City and more recently in Boston. Currently, he holds a MacArthur Fellowship and teaches at Boston University. Walcott's first three booklets—25 Poems *(1948),* Epitaph for the Young *(1949), and* Poems *(1951)—were privately printed in the West Indies. His mature work begins with* In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960 *(1962) and* Selected Poems *(1964). Since then he has published seven individual poetry books:* The Castaway *(1965),* The Gulf *(1969), the book-length autobiographical poem* Another Life *(1973),* Sea Grapes *(1976),* The Star-Apple Kingdom *(1979),* The Fortunate Traveller *(1981) and* Midsummer *(1984). At the time of this interview Walcott was looking forward to the publication of his* Collected Poems*—which appeared in the winter of 1986. Considering himself equally a poet and a playwright, Walcott has also published three books of plays in America:* Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays *(1970),* The Joker of Seville and O Babylon! *(1978), and* Remembrance and Pantomime: Two Plays *(1980).*

To live next door to Walcott, even for a week, is to understand how he has managed to be so productive over the years. A prodigious worker, he often starts at about 4:30 in the morning and continues until he has done a four or five hour stint—by the time most people are getting up for the day. On a small easel next to a small blue portable typewriter, he had

recently done a pencil drawing of his wife, Norline, and a couple of new watercolors to serve as storyboards for a film version of Pantomime *(he is doing the film script); he had also just finished the draft of an original screenplay about a steel band, as well as an extended essay about the Grenada invasion (to be called "Good Old Heart of Darkness"), and a new manuscript of poems, "The Arkansas Testament" (Spring, 1987). At the time of this interview the cuttings for two more films were all but complete: a film version of his play,* Haitian Earth *(which he had produced in St. Lucia the previous year), and a documentary film about Hart Crane for public television. At times one gets the impression that the poetry for which he is primarily known has had to be squeezed between all his other projects.*

And yet while I was in St. Lucia, most of Walcott's other activities were suspended as he worked on a new poem, "The Light of the World." It is a homecoming poem, a Narrative lyric about returning to Castries. The poem is set on a transport—what we would call a mini-bus—and characterizes the poet's sense of feeling both separated from, and connected to, the life of the people around him. Once more he is struck by the grace as well as the difficult poverty of his people; he reexperiences the beauty of St. Lucian women and feels the weight of their daily lives. "The Light of the World" is a large poem of guilt and expiation, and it gives a good sense of Walcott's inner feelings during the time of our interview.

Our conversation took place over three days—beginning in the late afternoon or early evening and continuing until dark. We talked at the table and chairs outside our cottages where we could hear the wind in the coconut trees and the waves breaking on the shore. A compact man in his mid-fifties, Walcott was still dressed from his afternoon on the beach—barefoot, a pair of brown beach trunks and a thin cotton shirt. Often he kept a striped beach towel draped around his shoulders, a white flour-sack beach hat pushed forward jauntily on his head. He seemed always to be either smoking or about to start.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to begin by asking you to talk about your family background. In many ways it was atypical for St. Lucia. For example, you were raised as a Methodist on a primarily Catholic island. Your family also seems to have been unusually oriented toward the arts.

DEREK WALCOTT: My family background really only consists of my mother. She was a widow. My father died quite young; he must have been thirty-one. Then there was my twin brother and my sister. We had two aunts as well, my father's sisters. But the immediate family consisted of my mother, my brother, my sister, and me. I remember from very early childhood my mother, who was a teacher, reciting a lot around the house. I remember coming across drawings that my father had done, poems that he had written, watercolors that were hanging in our living room—his original watercolors—and a terrific series of books: a lot of Dickens, Scott, quite a lot of poetry. There was also an old victrola with a lot of classical records. And so my family always had this interest in the arts. Coming from a Methodist minority in a French Catholic island, we also felt a little beleaguered. The Catholicism propounded by the French provincial priests in St. Lucia was a very hide-bound, prejudiced, medieval, almost hounding kind of Catholicism. The doctrine that was taught assigned all Protestants to limbo. So we felt defensive about our position. This never came to a head, but we did feel we had to stay close together. It was good for me too,

to be able to ask questions as a Protestant, to question large authority. Nobody in my generation at my age would dare question the complete and absolute authority of the church. Even into sixth form, my school friends and I used to have some terrific arguments about religious doctrine. It was a good thing. I think young writers ought to be heretical.

INTERVIEWER: In an essay called "Leaving School" you suggest that the artifacts of your father's twin avocations, poetry and painting, made your own sense of vocation seem inevitable. Would you describe his creative work and how it affected you?

WALCOTT: My mother, who is nearly ninety now, still talks continually about my father. All my life I've been aware of her grief about his absence and her strong pride in his conduct. He was very young when he died of mastoiditis which is an ear infection. Medicine in St. Lucia in those days was crude or very minimal; I know he had to go to Barbados for operations. I don't remember the death or anything like that, but I always felt his presence because of the paintings that he did. He had a self-portrait in watercolor in an oval frame next to a portrait of my mother, an oil that was very good for an amateur painter. I remember once coming across a backcloth of a very ordinary kind of moonlight scene that he had painted for some number that was going to be done by a group of people who did concerts and recitations and stuff like that. So that was always there. Now that didn't make me a morose, morbid child. Rather, in a sense, it gave me a kind of impetus and a strong sense of continuity. I felt that what had been cut off in him somehow was an extension that I was continuing.

INTERVIEWER: When did you first discover his poems?

WALCOTT: The poems I'm talking about are not a collection. I remember a couple of funny lyrics that were done in a southern American dialect for some show he was probably presenting. They were witty little satirical things. I can't remember any poems of a serious nature. I remember more of his art work. I remember a fine watercolor copy of Millet's "The Gleaners" which he had in the living room. The original is an oil painting and even now I am aware of the delicacy of that copy. He had a delicate sense of watercolor. Later on I discovered that my friend Harold Simmons, who was a professional painter, evidently was encouraged by my father to be a painter. So there's always this continuity in my association with people who knew him and people who were very proud to be his friend. My mother would tell us that, and that's what I felt.

INTERVIEWER: Your book-length autobiographical poem, *Another Life*, makes it clear that two painters were crucial to your development: your mentor Harold Simmons, called Harry in the poem, and your friend Dunstan St. Omer, renamed Gregorias. Would you talk about their importance to you?

WALCOTT: Harry taught us. He had paints, he had music in his studio, and he was evidently a good friend of my father's. When he found out that we liked painting, he invited about four or five of us to come up to his studio and sit out on his veranda. He gave us equipment and told us to draw. Now that may seem very ordinary in a city, in another place, but in a very small, poor country like St. Lucia it was extraordinary. He encouraged us to spend our Saturday afternoons painting; he

surrounded us with examples of his own painting. Just to let us be there and to have the ambience of his books, his music, his own supervision and the stillness and dedication that his life meant in that studio was a terrific example. The influence was not so much technical. Of course, I picked up a few things from him in terms of technique: how to do a good sky, how to water the paper, how to circle it, how to draw properly and concentrate on it, and all of that. But there were other things apart from the drawing. Mostly, it was the model of the man as a professional artist that was the example. After a while, the younger guys dropped out of the drawing thing and Dunstan St. Omer and I were left. We used to go out and paint together. We discovered it at the same time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a favorite painter then?

WALCOTT: The painter I really thought I could learn from was Cézanne—some sort of resemblance to oranges and greens and browns of the dry season in St. Lucia. I used to look across from the roof towards Vigie—the barracks were there and I'd see the pale orange roofs and the brickwork and the screen of trees and the cliff and the very flat blue and think a lot of Cézanne. Maybe because of the rigidity of the cubes and the verticals and so on. It's as if he knew the St. Lucian landscape—you could see his painting happening there. There were other painters of course, like Giorgione, but I think it gave me a lot of strength to think of Cézanne when I was painting.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say about the epiphanic experience described in *Another Life*, which seems to have confirmed your destiny as a poet and sealed a bond to your native island?

WALCOTT: There are some things people avoid saying in interviews because they sound pompous or sentimental or too mystical. I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation. What I described in *Another Life*—about being on the hill and feeling the sort of dissolution that happened—is a frequent experience in a younger writer. I felt this sweetness of melancholy, of a sense of mortality, or rather of immortality, a sense of gratitude both for what you feel is a gift and for the beauty of the earth, the beauty of life around us. When that's forceful in a young writer, it can make you cry. It's just clear tears; it's not grimacing or being contorted, it's just a flow that happens. The body feels it is melting into what it has seen. This continues in the poet. It may be repressed in some way, but I think we continue in all our lives to have that sense of melting, of the "I" not being important. That is the ecstasy. It doesn't happen as much when you get older. There's that wonderful passage in Traherne where he talks about seeing the children as moving jewels until they learn the dirty devices of the world. It's not *that* mystic. Ultimately, it's what Yeats says: "Such a sweetness flows into the breast that we laugh at everything and everything we look upon is blessed." That's always there. It's a benediction, a transference. It's gratitude, really. The more of that a poet keeps, the more genuine his nature. I've always felt that sense of gratitude. I've never felt equal to it in terms of my writing, but I've never felt that I was ever less than that. And so in that particular passage in *Another Life* I was recording a particular moment.

INTERVIEWER: How do you write? In regard to your equation of poetry and prayer, is the writing ritualized in any way?

WALCOTT: I don't know how many writers are willing to confess to their private preparatory rituals before they get down to putting something on paper. But I imagine that all artists and all writers in that moment before they begin their working day or working night have that area between beginning and preparation, and however brief it is, there is something about it votive and humble and in a sense ritualistic. Individual writers have different postures, different stances, even different physical attitudes as they stand or sit over their blank paper, and in a sense, without doing it, they are crossing themselves; I mean, it's like the habit of Catholics going into water: you cross yourself before you go in. Any serious attempt to try to do something worthwhile is ritualistic. I haven't noticed what my own devices are. But I do know that if one thinks a poem is coming on—in spite of the noise of the typewriter, or the traffic outside the window, or whatever—you do make a retreat, a withdrawal into some kind of silence that cuts out everything around you. What you're taking on is really not a renewal of your identity but actually a renewal of your *anonymity* so that what's in front of you becomes more important than what you are. Equally—and it may be a little pretentious-sounding to say it—sometimes if I feel that I have done good work I do pray, I do say thanks. It isn't often, of course. I don't do it every day. I'm not a monk, but if something does happen I say thanks because I feel that it is really a piece of luck, a kind of fleeting grace that has happened to one. Between the beginning and the ending and the actual composition that goes on, there is a kind of trance that you hope to enter where every aspect of your intellect is functioning simultaneously for the progress of the composition. But there is no way you can induce that trance.

Lately, I find myself getting up earlier, which may be a sign of late middle-age. It worries me a bit. I guess this is part of the ritual: I go and make a cup of coffee, put on the kettle, and have a cigarette. By now I'm not too sure if out of habit I'm getting up for the coffee rather than to write. I may be getting up that early to smoke, not really to write.

INTERVIEWER: What time is this?

WALCOTT: It can vary. Sometimes it's as early as half-past three, which is, you know, not too nice. The average time would be about five. It depends on how well I'm sleeping. But that hour, that whole time of day, is wonderful in the Caribbean. I love the cool darkness and the joy and splendor of the sunrise coming up. I guess I would say, especially in the location of where I am, the early dark and the sunrise, and being up with the coffee and with whatever you're working on, is a very ritualistic thing. I'd even go further and say it's a religious thing. It has its instruments and its surroundings. And you can feel your own spirit waking.

INTERVIEWER: Recently, I heard you say that you were deeply formed by Methodism. How?

WALCOTT: In a private way, I think I still have a very simple, straightforward foursquare Methodism in me. I admire the quiet, pragmatic reason that is there in a faith like Methodism, which is a very practical thing of conduct. I'm not talking

about a fanatical fundamentalism. I suppose the best word for it is "decency." Decency and understanding are what I've learned from being a Methodist. Always, one was responsible to God for one's inner conduct and not to any immense hierarchy of angels and saints. In a way I think I tried to say that in some earlier poems. There's also a very strong sense of carpentry in Protestantism, in making things simply and in a utilitarian way. At this period of my life and work, I think of myself in a way as a carpenter, as one making frames, simply and well. I'm working a lot in quatrains, or I have been, and I feel that there is something in that that is very ordinary, you know, without any mystique. I'm trying to get rid of the mystique as much as possible. And so I find myself wanting to write very simply cut, very contracted, very speakable and very challenging quatrains in rhymes. Any other shape seems ornate, an elaboration on that essential cube that really is the poem. So we can then say the craft is as ritualistic as that of a carpenter putting down his plane and measuring his stanzas and setting them squarely. And the frame becomes more important than the carpenter.

INTERVIEWER: *Another Life* suggests that eventually you gave up painting as a vocation and decided to concentrate on poetry. Recently, though, you seem to be at work on your watercolors again. What happened?

WALCOTT: What I tried to say in *Another Life* is that the act of painting is not an intellectual act dictated by reason. It is an act that is swept very physically by the sensuality of the brushstroke. I've always felt that some kind of intellect, some kind of preordering, some kind of criticism of the thing before it is done, has always interfered with my ability to do a painting. I am in fairly continual practice. I think I'm getting adept at watercolor. I'm less mucky. I think I could do a reasonable oil painting. I could probably, if I really set out, be a fairly good painter. I can approach the sensuality. I know how it feels, but for me there is just no completion. I'm content to be a moderately good watercolorist. But I'm not content to be a moderately good poet. That's a very different thing.

INTERVIEWER: Am I correct that you published your first poem, "The Voice of St. Lucia," at the precocious age of fourteen? I've read that the poem stirred up a considerable local controversy.

WALCOTT: I wrote a poem talking about learning about God through nature and not through the church. The poem was Miltonic and posed nature as a way to learn. I sent it to the local papers and it was printed. Of course, to see your work in print for any younger writer is a great kick. And then the paper printed a letter in which a priest replied (in verse!) stating that what I was saying was blasphemous and that the proper place to find God was in church. For a young boy to get that sort of response from a mature older man, a priest who was an Englishman, and to be accused of blasphemy was a shock. What was a more chastising thing was that the response was in verse. The point of course was to show me that he was also capable of writing verse. He did his in couplets and mine was in blank verse. I would imagine if I looked at both now that mine was better.

INTERVIEWER: Most American and English readers think of *In a Green Night* as your first book. Before you published abroad, however, you had already printed

three booklets at your own expense in the West Indies. How did you come to publish the first one, *25 Poems*?

WALCOTT: I used to write every day in an exercise book, and when I first wrote I wrote with great originality. I just wrote as hard and as well as I felt. I remember the great elation and release I felt, a sort of hooking on to a thing, when I read Auden, Eliot, and everyone. One day I would write like Spender, another day I would write like Dylan Thomas. When I felt I had enough poems that I liked, I wanted to see them in print. We had no publishing house in St. Lucia or in the Caribbean. There was a Faber collection of books that had come out with poets like Eliot and Auden, and I liked the type-face and how the books looked. I thought, "I want to have a book like that." So I selected a collection of twenty-five of them and thought, "Well, these will look good because they'll look like they came from abroad; they'll look like a published book." I went to my mother and said, "I'd like to publish a book of poems, and I think it's going to cost me two hundred dollars." She was just a seamstress and schoolteacher, and I remember her being very upset because she wanted to do it. Somehow she got it; —a lot of money for a woman to have found on her salary. She gave it to me, and I sent off to Trinidad and had the book printed. When the books came back I would sell them to friends. I made the money back. In terms of seeing a book in print, the only way I could have done it was to publish it myself.

INTERVIEWER: Frank Collymore wrote a very appreciative essay about your early poetry. That must have been a heady experience for a nineteen year-old. After all, he was the editor of the ground-breaking Caribbean literary magazine, *Bim*, a man that Edward Braithwaite once called "the greatest of West Indian literary godfathers."

WALCOTT: Frank Collymore was an absolute saint. I got to know him through Harry Simmons. I have never met a more benign, gentle, considerate, selfless person. I'll never forget the whole experience of going over to Barbados and meeting him. To be treated at that age by a much older man with such care and love and so on was wonderful. He treated George Lamming the same way. There are people like that, people who love other people, love them for their work and what it is. He was not by any means a patronizing man. He never treated you as if he were a schoolmaster doing you good. I had great fortune when I was young in being treated like that by people, by people much older than I was who treated me, who treated my mind, as if I were equal to them. He was the best example of that.

INTERVIEWER: You once described yourself at nineteen as "an elated, exuberant poet madly in love with English" and said that as a young writer you viewed yourself as legitimately prolonging "the mighty line" of Marlowe and Milton. Will you talk about that sense of yourself?

WALCOTT: I come from a place that likes grandeur; it likes large gestures; it is not inhibited by flourish; it is a rhetorical society; it is a society of physical performance; it is a society of style. The highest achievement of style is rhetoric, as it is in speech and performance. It isn't a modest society. A performer in the Caribbean has to perform with the right flourish. A Calypsonian performer is equivalent to a bullfighter in the ring. He has to come over. He can write the wittiest Calypso, but if he's going to deliver it, he has to deliver it well, and he has to hit the audience with

whatever technique he has. Modesty is not possible in performance in the Caribbean, and that's wonderful. It's better to be large and to make huge gestures than to be modest and do tiptoeing types of presentations of oneself. Even if it's a private platform, it's a platform. The voice does go up in a poem. It is an address, even if it is to oneself. And the greatest address is in the rhetoric. I grew up in a place in which if you learned poetry, you shouted it out. Boys would scream it out and perform it and do it and flourish it. If you wanted to approximate that thunder or that power of speech, it couldn't be done by a little modest voice in which you muttered something to someone else. I came out of that society of the huge gesture. And literature is like that, I mean *theatrical* literature is like that, whether it's Greek or whatever. The recitation element in poetry is one I hope I never lose because it's an essential part of the voice being asked to perform. If we have poets we're really asking them, "Okay, tell me a poem." Generally the implication is, "Mutter me a poem." I'm not in that group.

INTERVIEWER: There is a confident, fiery sense of privilege in your early work. In a recent poem, *Midsummer*, you write "Forty years gone, in my island childhood, I felt that/the gift of poetry had made me one of the chosen,/that all experience was kindling to the fire of the Muse."

WALCOTT: I never thought of my gift—I have to say "my gift" because I believe it is a gift—as anything that I did completely on my own. I have felt from my boyhood that I had one function and that was somehow to articulate, not my own experience, but what I saw around me. From the time I was a child I knew it was beautiful. If you go to a peak anywhere in St. Lucia, you feel a simultaneous newness and sense of timelessness at the same time—the presence of where you are. It's a primal thing and it has always been that way. At the same time I knew that the poor people around me were not beautiful in the romantic sense of being colorful people to paint or to write about. I lived, I have seen them and I have seen things that I don't need to go far to see. I felt that that was what I would write about. That's what I felt my job was. It's something that other writers have said in their own way, even if it sounds arrogant. Yeats has said it; Joyce has said it. It's amazing Joyce could say that he wants to write for his race, meaning the Irish. You'd think that Joyce would have a larger, more continental kind of mind, but Joyce continued insisting on his provinciality at the same time he had the most universal mind since Shakespeare. What we can do as poets in terms of our honesty is simply to write within the immediate perimeter of not more than twenty miles really.

INTERVIEWER: How does your sense of discovery of new subject matter integrate with the formal elements in your work?

WALCOTT: One of the things that people have to look at in West Indian literature is this: that what we were deprived of was also our privilege. There was a great joy in making a world which so far, up to then, had been undefined. And yet the imagination wants its limits and delights in its limits. It finds its freedom in the definition of those limits. In a sense, you want to give more symmetry to lives that have been undefined. My generation of West Indian writers has felt such a powerful elation at having the privilege of writing about places and people for the first time

and, simultaneously, having behind them the tradition of knowing how well it can be done—by a Defoe, a Dickens, a Richardson. Our world made us yearn for structure as opposed to wishing to break away from it because there was no burden, no excess of literature in our heads. It was all new.

INTERVIEWER: Well, then how do you see yourself in terms of the great tradition of poetry in the English language?

WALCOTT: I don't. I am primarily, absolutely a Caribbean writer. The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself. I have never felt inhibited in trying to write as well as the greatest English poets. Now that has led to a lot of provincial criticism: the Caribbean critic may say, "You are trying to be English," and the English critic may say, "Welcome to the club." These are two provincial statements at either end of the spectrum. It's not a matter of trying to be English. I am obviously a Caribbean poet. I yearn for the company of better Caribbean poets, quite frankly. I feel a little lonely. I don't see what I thought might have happened—a stronger energy, a stronger discipline, and a stronger drive in Caribbean poetry. That may be because the Caribbean is more musical: every culture has its particular emphasis and obviously the Caribbean's poetry, talent, and genius is in its music. But then again the modern Caribbean is a very young thing. I consider myself at the beginning, rather than at the end, of a tradition.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that your relationship to English poetry has changed over the years? As your work has progressed you seem to have increasingly affiliated yourself with a line of New World poets from Whitman through St. John Perse to Aimé Césaire and Pablo Neruda.

WALCOTT: Carlos Fuentes talked in a *Paris Review* interview about the essential Central American experience, which includes the whole basin of the Caribbean—that it is already a place of tremendous fertility. The whole new world experience here is shared by Márquez as it is by Borges, as it is still by American writers. In fact, too many American poets don't take on the scale of America. Not because we should write epics but because it seems to be our place to try to understand. In places that are yet undefined the energy comes with the knowledge that this has not yet been described, this has not yet been painted. This means that I'm standing here like a pioneer. I'm the first person to look at this mountain and try to write about it. I'm the first person to see this lagoon, this piece of land. Here I am with this enormous privilege of just being someone who can take up a brush. My generation of West Indian writers, following after C. L. R. James, all felt the thrill of the absolute sense of discovery. That energy is concomitant with being where we are; it's part of the whole idea of America. And by America, I mean from Alaska right down to Curaçao.

INTERVIEWER: How do you respond to V. S. Naipaul's repeated assertion—borrowed from Trollope—that "Nothing was created in the British West Indies"?

WALCOTT: Perhaps it should read that "Nothing was created *by the British* in the West Indies." Maybe that's the answer. The departure of the British required and still requires a great deal of endeavor, of repairing the psychological damage done by their laziness and by their indifference. The desolation of poverty that exists in the

Caribbean can be very depressing. The only way that one can look at it and draw anything of value from it is to have a fantastic depth of strength and belief, not in the past but in the immediate future. And I think that whenever I come back here, however desolate and however despairing I see the conditions around me to be, I know that I have to draw on terrible reserves of conviction. To abandon that conviction is to betray your origins; it's to feel superior to your family, to your past. And I'm not capable of that.

INTERVIEWER: Why is the figure of Robinson Crusoe so important to you?

WALCOTT: I wrote a poem called "The Castaway." I told my wife I was going to stay by myself for a weekend somewhere down in Trinidad. My wife agreed. I stayed in a beachhouse by myself and I wrote the poem there. I had an image of the West Indian artist as someone who was in a shipwrecked position. I'm not saying that's the origin of my Crusoe idea. But it's possible. The beaches around here are generally very empty—just you, the sea, and the vegetation around you, and you're very much by yourself. The poems I have written around the Crusoe theme vary. One of the more positive aspects of the Crusoe idea is that in a sense every race that has come to the Caribbean has been brought here under situations of servitude or rejection, and that is the metaphor of the shipwreck, I think. Then you look around you and you have to make your own tools. Whether that tool is a pen or a hammer, you are building in a situation that's Adamic; you are rebuilding not only from necessity but also with some idea that you will be here for a long time and with a sense of proprietorship as well. Very broadly that is what has interested me in it. There are other ironies, like the position of Friday as the one who is being civilized. Actually, the reverse happens. People who come out to the Caribbean from the cities and the continents go through a process of being recultured. What they encounter here, if they surrender to their seeing, has a lot to teach them, first of all the proven adaptability of races living next to each other, particularly in places like Trinidad and Jamaica. And then also in the erasure of the idea of history. To me there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean—in the surf which continually wipes the sand clean, in the fact that those huge clouds change so quickly. There is a continual sense of motion in the Caribbean—caused by the sea and the feeling that one is almost traveling through water and not stationary. The size of time is larger—a very different thing in the islands than in the cities. We don't live so much by the clock. If you have to be in a place where you create your own time, what you learn, I think, is a patience, a tolerance, how to make an artisan of yourself rather than being an artist.

INTERVIEWER: Your recent play *Pantomime* explores the racial and economic side of the relationship between Crusoe and Friday. In the play, a white English hotel owner in Tobago proposes that he and his black handyman work up a satire on the Crusoe story for the entertainment of the guests. Is the play a parable about colonialism?

WALCOTT: The point of the play is very simple. There are two types. The prototypical Englishman is not supposed to show his grief publicly. He keeps a stiff upper lip. Emotion and passion are supposed to be things that a trueblood Englishman avoids. What the West Indian character does is to try to wear him down into

confessing that he is capable of such emotion and there's nothing wrong in showing it. Some sort of catharsis is possible. That is the main point of the play. It's to take two types and put them together, put them in one arena and have that happen. I have never thought of it really as a play about racial conflict. When it's done in America, it becomes a very tense play because of the racial situation there. When it's done here, it doesn't have those deep historical overtones of real bitterness. I meant it to be basically a farce that might instruct. And the instruction is that we can't just contain our grief, that there's purgation in tears, that tears can renew. Of course, inside the play there's a point in which both characters have to confront the fact that one is white and one is black. They have to confront their history. But once that peak is passed, once the ritual of confrontation is over, then that's the beginning of the play. I've had people say they think the ending is corny, but generally that criticism has come when I'm in America. The idea of some reconciliation or some adaptability of being able to live together, that is sometimes rejected by people as being a facile solution. But I believe it's possible.

INTERVIEWER: How would you differentiate your work of the middle and late sixties, *The Castaway* and *The Gulf*, from your previous writing?

WALCOTT: There's a vague period in any poet's life between thirty and forty that is crucial because you can either keep working in one direction, or you can look back on your earlier work as juvenilia, a nice thing to look at from a distance. You have to head toward being forty with a certain kind of mindset to try to recreate chaos so you can learn from it. Yet you also have the fear that your work really has been basically mediocre, a failure, predictable. You find yourself at a point at which you say, ah, so you have become exactly what you were afraid of becoming: this person, this writer, with a certain name and a certain thing expected of you, and you are fulfilling that mold. The later books attempt to work against the given identity. At this point I don't think they're deep enough in terms of their sense of sin. Their sense of guilt could be more profound. In a way a lot of these poems smooth over while seething underneath the surface. One can always put a sort of poster over the rough, you know. A smoothness of attitude over something that's basically quite null and chaotic and unsettling. A lot of the roughness is missing in these books, but then that dissatisfaction continues all one's life.

INTERVIEWER: Would you talk about your experience in the Trinidad Theater Workshop which you founded in 1959 and finally left in 1976? You once stated that you wanted to create a theater where someone could produce Shakespeare and sing Calypso with equal conviction. Did the idea succeed?

WALCOTT: Yes, I think I made that happen. The best West Indian actors are phenomenal. Most West Indian actors have gone to West Indian secondary schools. The classical training and reading they get there is pretty wide and impressive—a lot of Shakespeare, and all the great English writers. Once that happens people read much more widely than if they hadn't done the great poets. So most West Indian actors have a familiarity with the classic theater of the English language. They also have an accent, not an affected accent, but a speech that is good diction. Some of the finest Shakespeare I have ever heard was spoken by West Indian actors. The sound of

Shakespeare is certainly not the sound we now hear in Shakespeare, that androgynous BBC-type, high-tone thing. It's a coarse thing—a great range between a wonderful vulgarity and a great refinement, and we have that here. We have that vulgarity and we also have that refinement in terms of the diction. The West Indian actor has a great rhetorical interest in language. In addition to that, the actor is like the West Indian writer in that he is a new person: what he is articulating has just begun to be defined. There's a sense of pioneering. For me writing plays was even more exciting than working on poems because it was a communal effort, people getting together and trying to find things. When I won a fellowship to go to America in 1958, I wanted to have, much as the Actors Studio did, a place where West Indian actors, without belonging to any company, could just come together and try and find out simple things such as how to talk like ourselves without being affected or without being incoherent, how to treat dialect as respectfully as if we were doing Shakespeare or Chekhov, and what was our own inner psychology as individuals, in a people, as part of a people. The first couple of years we had a very tough time. Very few people would come. We didn't know what we were doing; we just improvised and explored and tried things. I was determined not to do a production until I though we had some kind of ensemble. I had no intention of forming a company. At that time, all I wanted to do was to have the actors come and begin to work together. It took a very long time. But eventually we did put on a play and for about seventeen years I had a terrific company. It also began to involve dancers and some great actors. I remember Terry Hands came once (he is now one of the associate directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company) for a performance of *The Joker of Seville* that Margaret, my then wife, suggested we do. We had this little arena, like a bullfight ring, or a cockfight ring, and we served sandwiches and coffee and oranges and so on, and the crowd by that time had begun to know the songs and they were singing along with the actors. Terry said to me, "Derek, you're doing what Brecht tried to do." Well, I felt terrific because I knew what he meant. Brecht's idea of the participation of the audience, the whole idea of the boxing ring as a stage or the stage as an arena, had happened. But after several years of falling out and fighting and coming back together, eventually, for all sorts of reasons, the thing wore down. Although I still use actors from the company singly, I no longer run the company. But seventeen years is a long time to run a theater company.

INTERVIEWER: You've written that you first began writing drama "in the faith that one was creating not merely a play, but a theater, and not merely a theater, but its environment." But by the time you came to write the prologue to *Dream on Monkey Mountain* in 1970, the feeling of pride was replaced mainly by exhaustion and the sense of innocence seems to have given way to despair. What happened?

WALCOTT: Well, right now I'm writing a play called *A Branch of the Blue Nile*—about actors, a small company of actors and how they fall apart. I don't know up to now—and I'll have to decide pretty quickly—if it's going to end badly. The epiphany of the whole thing, the end of it, is a question that remains.

INTERVIEWER: Is the problem at all related to questions of whether the state should support the arts?

WALCOTT: I'm fifty-five now and all my life I've tried to fight and write and jeer and encourage the idea that the state owes its artists a lot. When I was young it looked like a romance: now that I'm older and I pay taxes, it is a fact. But not only do I want roads, I want pleasure, I want art. This is the terrible thing in the Caribbean. The middle class in the Caribbean is a venal, self-centered, indifferent, self-satisfied, smug society. It enjoys its philistinism. It pays very short lip-service to its own writers and artists. This is a reality every artist knows. The point is whether you say that and then turn your back on it and say to hell with it for life. I haven't done that and I don't think I'm capable of doing it. What's wrong is this: a legacy has been left by the British empire of amateurism. What we still have as an inheritance is that art is an amateur occupation. That attitude is combined with some of the worst aspects of bourgeois mercantilism, whether it is French, Danish, British, or Spanish bourgeois. The whole of the Caribbean that I can think of has this stubborn, clog-headed indifference to things around them. The philanthropy that exists in the Caribbean is negligible. Money is here—you just have to see the houses and the cars, and to look at the scale of living in any one of these islands—but nobody gives anything. If they do, I don't know what they give to, but that penny-pinching thing is typical of the petty-bourgeois merchant, the hoarder of money. Without any bitterness I can say that anything that I have gotten, whether earned or not, has been from America and not from the Caribbean.

INTERVIEWER: What constitutes an artistic generation in the Caribbean?

WALCOTT: An artistic generation in this part of the world is about five years. Five years of endurance. After that, I think people give up. I see five years of humanity and boredom and futility. I keep looking at younger writers, and I begin to see the same kind of despair forming and the same wish to say the hell with it, I'm getting out of here. There's also a problem with government support. We have come to a kind of mechanistic thinking that says, a government concerns itself with housing, food, and whatever. There will always be priorities in terms of sewage and electricity. If only a government could form the idea that any sensible human being wants not only to have running water, but a book in hand and a picture on the wall. That is the kind of government I had envisaged in the Caribbean when I was eighteen or nineteen. At fifty-five, I have only seen an increase in venality, an increase in selfishness, and worse than that, a shallow kind of service paid to the arts. I'm very bitter about the philistinism of the Caribbean. It is tough to see a people who have only one strength and that is their culture. Trinidad is perhaps the most concentrated example of a culture that has produced so many thousands and thousands of artisans at Carnival. Now Carnival is supported by the government, but that's seasonal kind of thinking. I'm talking about something more endemic, more rooted, more organic to the idea of the Caribbean. Because we have been colonies, we have inherited everything and the very thing we used to think was imperial has been repeated by our own stubborness, stupidity, and blindness.

INTERVIEWER: Your prologue to *Dream on Monkey Mountain* also blasts the crass, state-sponsored commercialization of folk culture. One of your subjects in both poetry and essays has been how negatively tourism has affected the West Indies. Would you discuss that?

WALCOTT: Once I saw tourism as a terrible danger to a culture. Now I don't, maybe because I come down here so often that perhaps literally I'm a Tourist *myself* coming from America. But a culture is only in danger if it allows itself to be. Everybody has a right to come down in the winter and enjoy the sun. Nobody has a right to abuse anybody, and so I don't think that if I'm an American anybody should tell me, please don't come here because this beach is ours, or whatever. During the period I'm talking about, certainly, servility was a part of the whole deal—the waiters had to smile, and we had to do this and so forth. In tourism, it was just an extension of master/servant. I don't think it's so anymore. Here we have a generation that has strengthened itself beyond that. As a matter of fact, it can go beyond a balance and there's sullenness and a hostility toward people who are your guests. It can swing too far as well. But again, it's not enough to put on steel bands and to have people in the hotels entertaining and maybe to have a little show somewhere to keep them what they think is light-minded and happy and indifferent and so on. If that's the opinion that the government or culture has of itself, then it deserves to be insulted. But if it were doing something more rooted in terms of the arts, in terms of its writers, its painters, and its performers, and if there were more pride in that and not the kind of thing you see of guys walking around town totally bored and hoping something can happen. . . . I'm not one to say that you can't do things for yourself because certainly having spent all my life in the Caribbean theater and certainly seventeen very exacting years in the workshop, I do say, yes—get up and do it yourself and stop depending on the government. But there is a point where you have to turn to the state and say, "Look man, this is ridiculous. I pay my taxes. I'm a citizen. I don't have a museum. I don't have a good library. I don't have a place where I can perform. I don't have a place where I can dance." That's criminal. It's a carry-over of the same thing I said about the West Indies being seized and atrophied by a petty-bourgeois mentality from the metropolis that has been adopted by the Creole idea of life which is simply to have a damn good time and that's it, basically. I mean that's the worst aspect of West Indian life: have a good time, period.

INTERVIEWER: What do you have against folklorists and anthropologists? Some people think of them as an intellectually respectable lot.

WALCOTT: I don't trust them. They either embarrass or elevate too much. They can do a good service if they are reticent and keep out of the way. But when they begin to tell people who they are and what they are, they are terrifying. I've gone to seminars in which people in the audience who are the people the folklorists are talking about, are totally baffled by their theories.

INTERVIEWER: One of your most well-known early poems, "A Far Cry from Africa," ends with the question, "How can I turn from Africa and live?" However, by 1970 you could write that "The African revival is escape to another dignity," and that "Once we have lost our wish to be white, we develop a longing to become black, and those two may be different, but are still careers." You also assert that the claim to be African is not an inheritance but a bequest, "a bill for the condition of our arrival as slaves." These are controversial statements. What is your current sense of the West Indian writer's relationship to Africa?

WALCOTT: There is a duty in every son to become his own man. The son severs himself from the father. The Caribbean very often refuses to cut that umbilical cord to confront its own stature. So a lot of people exploit an idea of Africa out of both the wrong kind of pride and the wrong kind of heroic idealism. At great cost and a lot of criticism, what I used to try to point out was that there is a great danger in historical sentimentality. We are most prone to this because of suffering, of slavery. There's a sense of skipping the part about slavery, and going straight back to a kind of Eden-like grandeur, hunting lions, that sort of thing. Whereas what I'm saying is to take in the fact of slavery, if you're capable of it, without bitterness, because bitterness is going to lead to the fatality of thinking in terms of revenge. A lot of the apathy in the Caribbean is based on this historical sullenness. It is based on the feeling of "Look what you did it me." Well, "Look what you did to me," is juvenile, right? And also, "Look what I'm going to do to you," is wrong. Think about illegitimacy in the Caribbean! Few people can claim to find their ancestry in the linear way. The whole situation in the Caribbean is an illegitimate situation. If we admit that from the beginning that there is no shame in that historical bastardy, then we can be men. But if we continue to sulk and say, "Look at what the slave-owner did," and so forth, we will never mature. While we sit moping or writing morose poems and novels that glorify a nonexistent past, then time passes us by. We continue in one mood, which is in too much of Caribbean writing: that sort of chafing and rubbing of an old sore. It is not because one wishes to forget; on the contrary, you accept it as much as anybody accepts a wound as being a part of his body. But this doesn't mean that you nurse it all your life.

INTERVIEWER: *The Fortunate Traveller* is filled with poems set in a wide variety of places. The title poem itself elaborates the crisis of a fortunate traveller who goes from one underdeveloped country to another. And in "North and South" you write that "I accept my function/as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire,/a single, circling, homeless satellite." Has The Castaway given way to the Traveller? Do you still feel the old tugs between home and abroad?

WALCOTT: I've never felt that I belong anywhere else but in St. Lucia. The geographical and spiritual fixity is there. However, there's a reality here as well. This afternoon I asked myself if I would stay here for the rest of my life if I had the chance of leaving. The answer really is, I suppose, no. I don't know if I'm distressed by that. One is bound to feel the difference between these poor, dark, very small houses, the people in the streets, and yourself because you always have the chance of taking a plane out. Basically you are a fortunate traveller, a visitor; your luck is that you can always leave. And it's hard to imagine that there are people around you unable, incapable of leaving either because of money or because of any number of ties. And yet the more I come back here the less I feel that I'm a prodigal or a castaway returning. And it may be that as it deepens with age, you get more locked into what your life is and where you've come from and what you misunderstand and what you should have understood and what you're trying to reunderstand and so on. I'll continue to come back to see if what I write is not beyond the true experience of the person next to me on the bus—not in terms of talking down to that person, but of

sharing that person's pain and strength necessary in those pathetically cruel circumstances in which people have found themselves following the devastations of colonialism.

INTERVIEWER: What led you to assert, as you do in *Midsummer*, that "to curse your birthplace is the final evil"?

WALCOTT: I think it is. I think the earth that you come from is your mother and if you turn around and curse it, you've cursed your mother.

INTERVIEWER: You've written a number of poems about New York City, Boston, old New England, and the southern United States. I'm thinking in particular of the first section of *The Fortunate Traveller* where one of the poems is entitled "American Muse" and another asserts "I'm falling in love with America." What are your feelings about living in the United States? Do you think you've been Americanized in any way?

WALCOTT: If so, voluntarily. I don't think I've been brainwashed. I don't think I have been seduced by all the prizes and rewards. America has been extremely generous to me—not in a strictly philanthropical sense; I've earned that generosity. But it has given me a lot of help. The real thing that counts is whether that line is true about falling in love with America. That came about because I was travelling on a bus from one place to another, on a long ride looking at the American landscape. If you fall in love with the landscape of a place the next thing that comes is the people, right? The average American is not like the average Roman or British citizen. The average American doesn't think that the world belongs to him or her; Americans don't have imperialist designs in their heads. I find a gentleness and a courtesy in them. And they have ideals. I've travelled widely across America and I see things in America that I still believe in, that I like a lot.

INTERVIEWER: What are your feelings about Boston, which you have called the "city of my exile"?

WALCOTT: I've always told myself that I've got to stop using the word "exile." Real exile means a complete loss of the home. Joseph Brodsky is an exile; I'm not really an exile. I have access to my home. Given enough stress and longing I can always get enough money to get back home and refresh myself with the sea, the sky, whatever. I was very hostile about Boston in the beginning, perhaps because I love New York. In jokes, I've always said that Boston should be the capital of Canada. But it's a city that grows on you gradually. And where I live is very comfortable. It's close to the university. I work well there, and I very much enjoy teaching. I don't think of myself as having two homes; I have one home, but two places.

INTERVIEWER: Robert Lowell had a powerful influence on you. I'm thinking of your memorial poem "RTSL" as well as the poem in *Midsummer* where you assert that "Cal's bulk haunts my classes." Would you discuss your relationship to Lowell?

WALCOTT: Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick were on a tour going to Brazil and they stopped off in Trinidad. I remember meeting them at Queen's Park Hotel and being so flustered that I called Elizabeth Hardwick, Edna St. Vincent Millay. She said, "I'm not that old yet." I was just flabbergasted. And then we became very friendly. My wife Margaret and I took them up to the beach. Their daughter, Harriet,

was there. I remember being up at this beach house with Lowell. His daughter and his wife, I think, must have gone to bed. We had gas lanterns. *Imitations* had just come out and I remember that he showed me his imitations of Hugo and Rilke and asked me what I thought about them. I asked him if two of the stanzas were from Rilke, and he said, "No, these are mine." It was a very flattering and warm feeling to have this fine man with this great reputation really asking me what I thought. He did that with a lot of people, very honestly, humbly, and directly. I cherish that memory a lot. When we went back to New York, Cal and Lizzy had a big party for us with a lot of people there, and we became very close. Cal was a big man in bulk but an extremely gentle, poignant person, and very funny. I don't think any of the biographies have caught the sort of gentle, amused, benign beauty of him when he was calm. He kept a picture of Peter, my son, and Harriet for a long time in his wallet, and he'd take it out and show it to me. He was sweetly impulsive. Once I went to visit him and he said, "Let's call up Allen Ginsberg and ask him to come over." That's so cherishable that it's a very hard thing for me to think of him as not being around. In a way, I can't separate my affection for Lowell from his influence on me. I think of his character and gentleness, the immediacy that was part of knowing him. I loved his openness to receive influences. He was not a poet who said, "I'm an American poet, I'm going to be peculiar, and I'm going to have my own voice which is going to be different from anybody's voice." He was a poet who said, "I'm going to take in everything." He had a kind of multifaceted imagination; he was not embarrassed to admit that he was influenced even in his middle-age by William Carlos Williams, or by François Villon, or by Boris Pasternak, all at the same time. That was wonderful.

INTERVIEWER: What about specific poetic influence?

WALCOTT: One of the things he said to me was, "You must put more of yourself in your poems." Also he suggested that I drop the capital letters at the top of the line, use the lower-case. I did it and felt very refreshed; it made me relax.It was a simple suggestion, but it's one of those things that a great poet can tell you that can be phenomenal—a little opening. The influence of Lowell on everyone, I think, is in his brutal honesty, his trying to get into the poetry a fictional power that wasn't there before, as if your life was a section of a novel—not because you are the hero, but because some of the things that were not in poems, some of the very ordinary banal details, can be illumined. Lowell emphasized the banality. In a sense to keep the banality banal and still make it poetic is a great achievement. I think that's one of the greatest things that he did in terms of his directness, his confrontation of ordinariness.

INTERVIEWER: Would you tell the story of your first poetry reading in the States? It must have been rewarding to hear Lowell's extravagant introduction.

WALCOTT: Well, I didn't know what he said because I was in back of the curtain, I think it was at the Guggenheim. I was staying at the Chelsea Hotel, and that day I felt I needed a haircut, so, foolishly, I went around the corner and sat down. The barber took the electric razor and gave me one of the wildest haircuts I think I've ever had. It infuriated me, but you can't put your hair back on. I even thought of wearing a hat. But I went on anyway, my head looked like hell. I had gotten some distance into the reading—I was reading "A Far Cry From Africa"—when suddenly there was

the sound of applause from the auditorium. Now I had never heard applause at a poetry reading before. I don't think I'd ever given a formal poetry reading, and I thought for some reason that the applause was saying it was time to stop, that they thought it was over. So I walked off the stage. I felt in a state of shock. I actually walked off feeling the clapping was their way of saying, "Well, thank you, it's been nice." Someone in charge asked me to go back and finish the reading, but I said no. I must have sounded extremely arrogant, but I felt that if I went back out there it would have been conceited. I went back to Trinidad. Since I hadn't heard Lowell's introduction, I asked someone for it at the Federal Building, which had archives of radio tapes from the Voice of America. I said I would like to hear the Lowell tape, and the guy said, "I think we erased that." It was only years later that I really heard what Cal said, and it was very flattering.

INTERVIEWER: How did you become friends with Joseph Brodsky?

WALCOTT: Well, ironically enough, I met Brodsky at Lowell's funeral. Roger Straus, Susan Sontag, and I went up to Boston for the funeral. We waited somewhere for Joseph, probably at the airport, but for some reason he was delayed. At the service I was in this pew when a man sat down next to me. I didn't know him. When I stood up as the service was being said, I looked at him and I thought, if this man is not going to cry then *I'm* not going to cry, either. I kept stealing glances at him to see if anything was happening, but he was very stern looking. That helped me to contain my own tears. Of course it was Brodsky. Later, we met. We went to Elizabeth Bishop's house, and I got to know him a little better. The affection that developed after that was very quick and, I think, permanent—to be specific about it is hard. I admire Joseph for his industry, his valor, and his intelligence. He's a terrific example of someone who is a complete poet, who doesn't treat poetry as anything else but a very hard job that he does as well as he can. Lowell worked very hard too, but you feel in Joseph that that is all he lives for. In a sense that's all any of us lives for or can hope to live for. Joseph's industry is an example that I cherish a great deal.

INTERVIEWER: When did you first become friends with Seamus Heany?

WALCOTT: There was a review by A. Alvarez of Seamus's book a very upsetting review—to put it mildly—in which he was describing Heany as a sort of blue-eyed boy. English literature always has a sort of blue-eyed boy. I got very angry over the review and sent Seamus a note via my editor with a little obscenity in it. Just for some encouragement. Later, in New York we had a drink at someone's house. From then on, the friendship has developed. I see him a lot when he is in Boston at Harvard. I just feel very lucky to have friends like Joseph and Seamus. The three of us are outside of the American experience. Seamus is Irish, Joseph is Russian, I'm West Indian. We don't get embroiled in the controversies about who's a soft poet, who's a hard poet, who's a free verse poet, who's not a poet, and all of that. It's good to be on the rim of that quarreling. We're on the perimeter of the American literary scene. We can float out here happily not really committed to any kind of particular school or body of enthusiasm or criticism.

INTERVIEWER: Over the years your style seems to have gotten increasingly plainer and more direct, less gnarled, more casual, somehow both quieter and fiercer at the same time. Is that an accurate assessment of the poetic style of your middle age? I can't imagine a book like *Midsummer* from the young Derek Walcott.

WALCOTT: It varies, of course. When I finished *Another Life*, I felt like writing short poems, more essential, to the point, things that were contracted. They didn't have the scale of the large book and so on. It goes in that kind of swing, in that kind of pendulum. In the case of *Midsummer*, I felt that for the time being I didn't want to write any more poems, although that sounds arrogant. I just felt perhaps I was overworking myself. I was going to concentrate purely on trying to develop my painting. While painting, I would find lines coming into my head. I would almost self-destruct them; I'd say, all right, I'll put them down . . . but with antipoetic vehemence. If they don't work, then I'll just forget it. What kept happening is that the lines would come anyway, perhaps out of that very irritation, and then I would make a very arbitrary collage of them and find they would take some sort of loose shape. Inevitably, of course, you try to join the seams. I was trying to do something, I think that was against the imagination, that was not dictated in a sort of linear, lyrical, smooth, melodic—but rather something that was antimelodic. For a poem, if you give a poem personality, that's the most exciting thing—to feel that it is becoming antimelodic. The vocabulary becomes even more challenging, the meter more interesting, and so on. So what happened was that by the very wish not to write, or to write a poem that was against the idea of writing poems, it all became more fertile and more contradictory and more complex. Gradually a book began to emerge. Inevitably you can't leave things lying around with unjoined shapes, little fragments and so on. I began to weld everything together—to keep everything that I felt worthwhile. I thought, well, whether this is just an ordinary thing or not, it has as much a right to be considered as something a little more grandiose. That's what I think happened to *Midsummer*.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about publishing your *Collected Poems?*

WALCOTT: You're aware of the fact that you have reached a certain stage in your life. You're also aware that you have failed your imagination to some degree, your ambitions. This is an amazingly difficult time for me. I'm absolutely terrified. It's not because I have a kind of J. D. Salinger thing about running away from publicity. It's really not wanting to see myself reflected in that way. I don't think that that's what the boy I knew—the boy who started to write poetry—wanted at all, not praise, not publicity. But it's troubling. I remember Dylan Thomas saying somewhere that he liked it better when he was not famous. All I can say is this: I do have another book about ready, and I hope it will be a compensation for all the deficiencies in the *Collected Poems*, something that will redeem the *Collected Poems*.

THE LANGUAGE OF EXILE

Seamus Heaney

A poet appeases his original needs by learning to make works that seem to be all his own work — Yeats at the stage of *The Wind among the Reeds.* Then begins that bothersome and and exhilarating second need, to go beyond what he has mastered of himself, take on the otherness of the world and take it into works that remain his own yet offer rights-of-way to everybody else: the kind of understanding and composure Yeats had won by the time he published *The Wild Swans at Coole.* Or the kind of sumptuous authority which Derek Walcott displays in *The Star-Apple Kingdom.*

"The Schooner *Flight,*" the long poem at the start of the book, is epoch-making. All that Walcott knew in his bones and plied in his thought before this moves like a long swell of energy under its fluent verse which sails, well rigged and richly cargoed, into the needy future. I imagine he has done for the Caribbean what Synge did for Ireland, found a language woven out of dialect and literature, neither folksy nor condescending, a singular idiom evolved out of one man's inherited divisions and obsessions that allows an older life to exult in itself yet at the same time keeps the cool of "the new." A few years ago, in the turbulent and beautiful essay which prefaced his collection of plays, *Dream on Monkey Mountain,* Walcott wrote out of and about the hunger for a proper form, for an instrument to bleed off the accumulated humors of his peculiar colonial ague. He has now found that instrument and wields it with rare confidence:

> You ever look up from some lonely beach
> and see a far schooner? Well, when I write
> this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
> I go draw and knot every line as tight
> as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
> my common language go be the wind,
> my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight.* (p. 5)

The speaker fixes his language in terms that recall Walcott's description of an ideal troupe of actors, "sinewy, tuned, elate," and the language works for him as a well-disciplined troupe works for the dramatist. It is not for subjective lyric effects but for

what James Wright has called "the poetry of a grown man" and the man has grown to that definitive stage which Yeats called "the finished man among his enemies."

For those awakening to the nightmare of history, revenge —'Walcott has conceded — can be a kind of vision, yet he himself is not vengeful. Nor is he simply a patient singer of the tears of things. His intelligence is fierce but it is literary. He assumes that art is a power and to be visited by it is to be endangered, but he also knows that works of art endanger nobody else, that they are benign. From the beginning he has never simplified or sold short. Africa and England beat messages along his blood. The humanist voices of his education and the voices from his elemental inarticulate place keep insisting on their full claims, pulling him in two different directions. He always had the capacity to write with the elegance of a Larkin and make himself a ventriloquist's doll to the English tradition which he inherited, though that of course would have been an attenuation of his gifts, for he also has the capacity to write with the murky voluptuousness of a Neruda and make himself a romantic tongue, licking poetic good things off his islands. He did neither, but made a theme of the choice and the impossibility of choosing. And now he has embodied the theme in the person of Shabine, the poor mulatto sailor of the *Flight,* a kind of democratic West Indian Ulysses, his mind full of wind and poetry and women. Indeed, when Walcott lets the sea-breeze freshen in his imagination, the result is a poetry as spacious and heart-lifting as the sea-weather at the opening of Joyce's *Ulysses,* a poetry that comes from no easy evocation of mood but from stored sensations of the actual:

> In idle August, while the sea soft,
> and leaves of brown islands stick to the rim
> of this Caribbean, I blow out the light
> by the dreamless face of Maria Concepcion
> to ship as a seaman on the schooner *Flight.*
> Out in the yard turning gray in the dawn,
> I stood like a stone and nothing else move
> but the cold sea rippling like galvanize
> and the nail holes of stars in the sky roof,
> till a wind start to interfere with the trees. (p. 3)

It is a sign of Walcott's mastery that his fidelity to the genius of English now leads him not away from but right into the quick of West Indian speech. When he wrote these opening lines, how conscious was he of another morning departure, another allegorical early-riser? The murmur of Malvern is under that writing for surely it returns to an origin in *Piers Plowman:*

> In summer season, when soft was the sun,
> I rigged myself up in a long robe, rough like a sheep's,
> With skirts hanging like a hermit's, unholy of works,
> Went wide in this world, wonders to hear.

But on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,
A marvel befel me — magic it seemed.
I was weary of wandering and went for a rest
Under a broad bank, by a brook's side;
And as I lay lolling, looking at the water,
I slid into a sleep . . .

The whole passage could stand as an epigraph to the book insofar as it is at once speech and melody, amorous of the landscape, matter of fact but capable of modulation to the visionary. Walcott's glamorous, voluble Caribbean harbors recall Langland's field full of folk. Love and anger inspire both writers, and both manage, in Eliot's phrase, to fuse the most ancient and most civilized mentality. The best poems in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* are dream visions; the high moments are hallucinatory, cathartic, redemptive even. Here, for example, is a passage from "Koenig of the River," where Koenig appears on his shallop like some Dantesque shade arisen out of the imperial dream, being forced to relive it in order to comprehend it:

Around the bend the river poured its silver
like some remorseful mine, giving and giving
everything green and white: white sky, white
water, and the dull green like a drumbeat
of the slow-sliding forest, the green heat;
then, on some sandbar, a mirage ahead:
fabric of muslin sails, spiderweb rigging,
a schooner, foundered on black river mud,
was rising slowly up from the riverbed,
and a top-hatted native reading an inverted newspaper
"Where's our Queen?" Koenig shouted.
"Where's our Kaiser?"
The nigger disappeared.
Koenig felt that he himself was being read
like the newspaper or a hundred-year-old novel.
"The Queen dead! Kaiser dead!" the voices shouted.
And it flashed through him those trunks were not wood
but that the ghosts of slaughtered Indians stood
there in the mangroves, their eyes like fireflies
in the green dark, and that like hummingbirds
they sailed rather than ran between the trees.
The river carried him past his shouted words.
The schooner had gone down without a trace.
"There was a time when we ruled everything,"
Koenig sang to his corrugated white reflection. (pp. 44-45)

There is a magnificence and pride about this art — specifically the art, not

specially the politics — that rebukes that old British notion of "commonwealth literature." Walcott possesses English more deeply and sonorously than most of the English themselves. Except for Ted Hughes, I can think of nobody now writing with such imperious linguistic gifts. And in spite of the sheen off those lines, I suspect he is not so much interested in the "finish" of his work as in its drive. He has written lyrics of memorable grace — "In a Green Night" and "Coral" come to mind as two different kinds of excellence — and his deliberately designed early sonnet sequence "Tales of the Islands" guaranteed the possibility of these latest monologues and narratives. His work for the stage has paid into his address to the poetry until the latter now moves itself and us in a way that Osip Mandelstam would certainly have approved. In his "Conversation about Dante"' Mandelstam wrote:

> The quality of poetry is decided by the speed and decisiveness with which it embodies its schemes and commands in diction, the instrumentless, lexical, purely quantitative verbal matter. One must traverse the full width of a river crammed with Chinese junks moving simultaneously in different directions — this is how the meaning of poetic discourse is created. The meaning, its itinerary, cannot be reconstructed by interrogating the boatmen: they will not be able to tell how and why we were skipping from junk to junk.

Something of that unpredictable, resourceful, and expeditionary motion keeps the title poem going. "The Star-Apple Kingdom" is discursive and meditative, a dive into the cultural and political matter of post-colonial Jamaica, yet the mode of the poem could hardly be described as either meditative or discursive. Again, there is a dream-heavy thing at work, as if the years of analysis and commitment to proper thinking and action resolved themselves for the poet into a sound halfway between sobbing and sighing. The poem does not have the pure windfall grace of "The Schooner *Flight*"— in places it sags into "writing" — but its pitch and boldness make a lovely orchestration of the music of what happens:

What was the Caribbean? A green pond mantling
behind the Great House columns of Whitehall,
behind the Greek façades of Washington,
with bloated frogs squatting on lily pads
like islands, islands that coupled as sadly as turtles
engendering islets, as the turtle of Cuba
mounting Jamaica engendered the Caymans, as, behind
the hammerhead turtle of Haiti-San Domingo
trailed the little turtles from Tortuga to Tobago;
he followed the bobbing trek of the turtles
leaving America for the open Atlantic,
felt his own flesh loaded like the pregnant beaches

with their moon-guarded eggs—they yearned for Africa,
they were lemmings drawn by magnetic memory
to an older death, to broader beaches
where the coughing of lions was dumbed by breakers.
Yes, he could understand their natural direction
but they would drown, sea eagles circling them,
and the languor of frigates that do not beat wings . . .

Walcott's poetry has passed the stage of self-questioning, self-exposure, self-healing to become a common resource. He is no propagandist. What he would propagate is magnanimity and courage and I am sure that he would agree with Hopkin's affirmation that feeling, and in particular love, is the great power and spring of verse. This book is awash with love of people and places and language: love as knowledge, love as longing, love as consummation, at one time the Sermon on the Mount, at another *Antony and Cleopatra:*

He lies like a copper palm
tree at three in the afternoon
by a hot sea
and a river, in Egypt, Tobago.

Her salt marsh dries in the heat
where he foundered
without armor.
He exchanged an empire for her beads of sweat.

the uproar of arenas,
the changing surf
of senators, for
this silent ceiling over silent sand —

this grizzled bear, whose fur,
moulting, is silvered —
for this quick fox with her
sweet stench. . .
("Egypt, Tobago" p. 30)

There is something risky about such large appropriations, but they are legitimate because Walcott's Caribbean and Cleopatra's Nile have the same sweltering awareness of the cynicism and brutality of political adventurers. He is not going beyond the field of his own imagery, he is appropriating Shakespeare, not expropriating him — the unkindest post-colonial cut of all.

Conscious maker that he is, Derek Walcott is certainly aware that the whirligig of time has brought in such revenges which turn out to be more ironies than revenges.

His sense of options and traditions is highly developed and his deliberate progress as a writer has not ended. Much that he inherited as inchoate communal plight has been voiced, especially in the dramatic modes of this volume, yet I am not sure that he won't return inwards to the self, to refine the rhetoric. "Forest of Europe," the poem dedicated to Joseph Brodsky, is aimed at the center of Walcott's themes — language, exile, art — and is written with the surge of ambition that marks him as a major voice. But I feel that the willful shaping intelligence has got too much of the upper hand in the poem, that the thrill of addressing a heroic comrade in the art has forced the note. I rejoice in everything the poem says — "what's poetry, if it is worth its salt, /but a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth?" (p. 40) — yet the poem is not securely in possession of its tone. Which could never be said of Shabine, who deals with the big themes in his own nonchalant way:

I met History once, but he ain't recognize me
a parchment Creole, with warts
like an old sea bottle, crawling like a crab
through the holes of shadow cast by the net
of a grille balcony; cream linen, cream hat.
I confront him and shout, "Sir, is Shabine!
They say I'se your grandson. You remember Grandma,
your black cook, at all?" The bitch hawk and spat.
A spit like that worth any number of words.
But that's all them bastards have left us: words. (pp. 8-9)

ON EUROCENTRIC CRITICAL THEORY: Some Paradigms From The Texts And Sub-Texts Of Post-Colonial Writing

Biodun Jeyifo

As quiet as it is kept, the realisation is gaining wide currency in literary circles around the world that the volume of writing now coming from the non-Western, Third World countries far outstrips that emanating from the "First World". Moreover, it is also increasingly being recognized that this vast harvest, this cornucopia from the Third World contains some of the most interesting and innovative writing in contemporary literature. Think about it: if, with "Anglophone", "Francophone" or "Lusophone" writing from the non-Western world you include writing in the most prominent literary languages of the Third World say, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Urdu, Gujerati, Swahili and Amharic, you can begin to get a grasp of the shifts in the densities and concentrations of the literary map of the world. But parallel to this phenomenal reconfiguration of the global balance of forces in the production of literature is the view also prevalent throughout the world, that the most penetrating, the most seminal criticism, metacriticism or "theory" is coming from the metropolitan centres in Europe and America. Just how prevalent this view of a new international division of labour in the world of literature and criticism has become is afforded by a recent short but thought provoking article in no less a publication than *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by W.J.T. Mitchell (April 19, 1989). Mr. Mitchell is a professor of English at the University of Chicago and moreover, is editor of *Critical Inquiry*, one of the most influential academic journals of contemporary criticism and literary theory in the English-speaking world. Let me quote some salient observations from the article:

> The most important new literature is emerging from the colonies — regions and peoples that have been economically or militarily dominated in the past — while the most provocative new literary criticism is emanating from the imperial centres that once dominated them — the industrial nations of Europe and America.
>
> Horace noted long ago that the transfer of empire from Greece to Rome (the *translatio imperii*) was accompanied by a transfer of culture and learning (a *translatio studii*). Today the cultural transfer is no longer one-way. But what is the nature of "the transference going on between the declining imperial power and their former colonies, and between contemporary literature and criticism?

Professor Mitchell's views and positions in this important article come from the liberal critical vanguardism of the American literary establishment, one that is particularly responsive to new currents, new directions from the "non-canonical" traditions of both literature and criticism. Moreover, Professor Mitchell advances the view in this article that powerful and increasingly desperate and hysterical neo-conservative critics and scholars are up in arms against the "reconceptualizations" and "reconfigurations" now emerging in the world of literature and criticism and that an alliance, "a positive, collaborative relationship between post-imperial criticism and post-colonial literature" might be needed to stave off this projected neoconservative redoubt. This is an important, weighty observation and I would like to frame my reflections in this short essay around what I perceive to be its many ramifications.

The call of Professor Mitchell in this article for collaboration and solidarity between "post-colonial literature" and "post-imperial criticism" no doubt comes from a genuine, enlightened solicitude which relates itself to serious areas of cultural politics, even if the designated terms and entities of the collaboration — "post-colonial literature" and "post-imperial criticism" — are not so unproblematic [But more on this later]. The journal which Mr. Mitchell edits has been an important forum for important interrogations of canonical orthodoxies and exclusionary critical practices which ignore texts and traditions other than the hegemonic literary production and critical discourses of Europe and America. One can only wish that more journals and institutions would, like the one Mr. Mitchell directs, and which are strategically located in the apparatus of theoretical inquiry and critical discourse, be more responsive to, or even be more aware of developments and trends beyond the concerns and obsessions of a self-cocooned Western canonical enclave.

But it must be recognized that the solicitude and enthusiasms of many Western critics and scholars for non-Western, post-colonial literature, have behind them a problematic history which is encapsulated by that troubled, loaded buzz word "Eurocentrism". For if Eurocentrism has often expressed itself, in different forms of cultural racism, as a denial of, a supercilious condescension towards non-Western literary traditions, it is also often conversely expressed as a generous solicitude, an authenticating embrace which confers what it deems a badge of authenticity, for the non-Western text, writer or whole literary traditions, only to be accosted with charges of paternalism and subtle forms of prejudice and will-to-domination.

At this late stage of the history of debates over imperialism and its discontents, one

states the obvious by pointing out that Eurocentrism is a vast cultural and intellectual phenomenon which subsumes its more local and particular expressions in literary criticism, and now "theory". The work of contemporary writers like Aimé Césaire (*Discourse on Colonialism),* Eric R. Wolf *(Europe and the People Without History),* Edward Said *(Orientalism),* Johannes Fabian *(Time and the Other)* and Talal Asad *(Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter),* among others, show the dispersal of the phenomenon among disparate disciplines and fields of inquiry. All of which goes to demonstrate that without having the models and standards of the exacting scholarship and broad, capacious vision of these scholars in mind, one enters the terrain of discourse and counter-discourse on Eurocentrism at the risk of gross simplifications and unsuspected discursive traps. And need I add that this last observation is intended not only as a general cautionary nudge to literary criticism, which often purposes itself as a substitute for all of critical thought, but also as a reminder to myself about the lurking pitfalls of *this* discursive terrain.

It will thus be readily appreciated that I have chosen to approach the subject in this essay by way of a calculated detour through the discourses on Eurocentrism embedded in some selected literary texts. In such contexts a host of textual strategies and rhetorical mediations absorb and defamiliarize the tensions and sensitivities that discussions of Eurocentrism almost always generate. In particular I have chosen two texts of Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *Pantomime* as paradigmatic deconstructions of the two types of Eurocentrism broadly hinted at above: the Eurocentrism which withholds, which excludes, which disdains; and that which embraces, invites, gives.

The distance covered in contemporary post-colonial writing in the debunking, the demythologization of Eurocentric claims to the embodiment of absolute Truth or Knowledge, especially of non-European peoples and societies, is, I believe, provided by the paradigmatic move in the dramaturgy of Derek Walcott from *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967) to *Pantomime* (1978) concerning the respective emblematic explorations in these two plays of the response of the "native" as the object of Eurocentric discursive, signifying and explanatory systems. A savage, iconoclastic, mythoclastic assault on the ethical-universal postulates of the Western intellectual traditions, and specifically the objective, positivist human sciences (like jurisprudence) marks what we may identify as the epistemological theme of these plays, where "theme" is an inaccurate, inadequate conceptual representation of these aspects of both Walcott's dramaturgy and a host of other post-colonial writers, from Achebe to Coetzee, from Soyinka to Rushdie, from Mariama Ba to Ama Ata Aidoo. We see this common iconoclastic impulse particularly in the characters of Corporal Lestrade and Moustique in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and Jackson Philip in *Pantomime.* What powers this impulse is the thinking that "white" domination is not only political and socio-economic, it is also, or aspires to total effectivity in the naming of things, in signifying and explanatory systems; in other words, it seeks to be an *epistemic* order of control and manipulation. Corporal Lestrade and Jackson Philip in particular deploy a surfeit of brilliant, witty conceits and tropes to debunk this epistemic, nomenclatural hegemony. But there are important, even decisive departures in the respective

overall demythologizing impulse and postures of these two plays, and it is this pattern of differentiation which commends them as suggestive paradigms for the debates on Eurocentrism and critical theory.

Between Corporal Lestrade and Moustique in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* what we encounter is the "native" who, having rejected both Eurocentric discursive colonization *and* autonomous indigenous epistemologies and ritual beliefs, can only lapse into a desperate cynicism, charlantanism, and in the case of Moustique, a convenient opportunism. The powerful "healing" dream scene of Act One of the play renders this aspect of Moustique's vocation as an "explainer", who, despising both the colonizer and the colonized and their respective panoply of signification, appeals to a Transcendent, omniscient Spirit [God] outside, beyond and above the contest, a Spirit in whom Moustique does not believe but only deploys in order to manipulate the colonized "native" population:

> MOUSTIQUE
> Ah, ah you see, all you.
> Ain't white priest come and nothing happen?
> Ain't white doctor come and was agony still?
> Ain't you take bush medicine, and no sweat break?
> White medicine, bush medicine,
> not one of them work!
> White prayers, black prayers,
> and still no deliverance!
> And who heal the man?
> Makak! Makak!
> All your deliverance lie in this man.
> The man is God's messenger
> So, further the cause, brothers and sisters.
> [He opens his haversack and holds it before him]
> Further the cause,
> Drop what you have in there...
> God's work must be done,
> and like Saint Peter self,
> Moustique, that's me,
> is Secretary-Treasurer
> (p. 251)

The logic of this cynically opportunist, self-cancelling, double assault on both Eurocentric epistemologies and signifying systems *and* the countermanding nativist response reaches its most brilliant, relentless articulation in the famous Apotheosis scene of the play [Scene Three, Part Two]. Walcott indisputably wrote this magnificent cautionary allegorization of the natives' revenge against what Gayatri Spivak has theorized as the totalizing "epistemic violence" of imperialism with the spirit of Bandung active in his creative consciousness, the heady spirit in the Fifties and Sixties

of "emergent" Africa and Asia coming into their own and settling scores with their former colonial overlords. The allegorical power of the scene derives, I think, from Walcott's frank, unflinching engagement with the violence of Eurocentric signifying practices and explanatory systems, in their imbrication in the objective of imperialistic domination. It is indeed useful to note that Walcott has the following quote from Sartre's famous Introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* as an epigraph to Part Two of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, the movement of the dramatic action of the play which brings the nihilistic confrontation with Eurocentrism to a head:

> Let us add, for certain other carefully selected unfortunates, that other witchery of which I have already spoken: Western culture. If I were them, you may say, I'd prefer my mumbo-jumbo to their Acropolis. Very good: you've grasped the situation. But not altogether, because you aren't them — or not yet. Otherwise you would know that they can't choose; they must have both. Two worlds; that makes two bewitchings; they dance all night and at dawn they crowd into the churches to hear Mass; each day the split widens. Our enemy betrays his brothers and becomes our accomplice; his brothers do the same thing. The status of "native" is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent.

Only against the background of this phantasmic but deadly serious agonistic encounter does the arraignment and trial of the whole of "Western culture" in this scene make "sense", a "sense", a logic which in fact was later to be acted out by Idi Amin in his gratuitous antics against some of the most resonant colonialist symbols and tropes of Eurocentrism such as the famous enactment in which he was borne aloft in a litter by four white men, this as a parodistic signification on the "White man's burden". It is, I think, necessary to quote from the scene at some length:

> [All have assembled. The CORPORAL steps forward, then addresses MAKAK]
> CORPORAL
> Inventor of history! [Kisses MAKAK's foot]
> MAKAK
> I am only a shadow.
> CORPORAL
> Shh. Quiet, my prince.
> MAKAK
> A hollow God. A phantom.
> CORPORAL
> Wives, warriors, chieftains! The law takes no sides, it changes the complexion of things. History is without pardon, justice hawk-swift, but mercy everlasting. We have prisoners and traitors, and they must be judged swiftly. The law of a country is the law of that country. Roman law, my friends, is not tribal law.Tribal law,in conclusion, is not Roman law. Therefore, wherever we are, let us have justice. We have no time for patient reforms. Mindless as the hawk, impetuous as lions, as dried of compassion as the bowels of a jackal. Elsewhere, the swiftness of justice is barbarously slow, but our progress cannot stop to think. In a short while, the prisoners shall be summoned, so prepare them, Basil and Pamphilion. First, the accused, and after them, the tributes.
> [The prisoners are presented]
> Read them, Basil!
> BASIL
> They are Noah, but not the son of Ham, Aristotle, I'm skipping a bit, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander of Macedon, Shakespeare, I can cite relevant texts, Plato, Copernicus, Galileo and perhaps Ptolemy, Christopher Marlowe, Robert E. Lee, Sir John Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake, The Phantom, Mandrake the Magician [The TRIBES are laughing] It's not funny, my Lords, Tarzan, Dante, Sir Cecil Rhodes, William Wilberforce, the unidentified author of The Song of Solomon, Lorenzo de Medici, Florence Nightingale, Al Jolson, Horatio Nelson, and, but why go on? Their crime, whatever their plea, whatever extenuation of circumstances, whether of genius or geography, is that they are indubitably, with the possible exception of Alexandre Dumas, Sr. and Jr., and Alexis, I think it is Pushkin, white. Some are dead and cannot speak for themselves, but a drop of milk is enough to condemn them, to banish them from the archives of the bo-leaf and the papyrus, from the waxen tablet and the tribal stone. For you, my Lords, are shapers of history. We await your judgement, O tribes.
> TRIBES
> Hang them!
> (p. 310-312)

"Their crime, whatever their plea, whatever extenuation of circumstances, whether of genius or geography, is that they are indubitably . . . white". The utter seriousness, the implacable, crystalline logic of this absurd arraignment — Shakespeare and Al Jolson, Galileo and the KKK — can only be grasped if we pluck from its dispersal in disparate semiotic contexts and significatory locations the coding and re-codings of "white" as the unmarked marker, "white" fetishized as ultimate repository of Beauty, Reality, Value: "Whites Only", "Honorary Whites" (a term officially accorded the Japanese in South Africa, but not other Asian national groups like the Chinese and Indians), the white-robed and hooded "Knights of Klu-Klux-Klan", the white anthropomorphic iconography of divinity and sainthood in Christianity, white bleaching creams. All these interfuse with more specifically *epistemological* coordinates: Western "white" civilization *racialized* (and not only by the Nazis) and encoded as the ultimate marker of Truth, Knowledge, Rationality in the elaborate constructs of "the great chain of being", as Arthur O. Lovejoy informs us in his

famous treatise of that title. Derek Walcott is barely in control of the relentlessly parodistic smashing of icon and fetishes in this play, given the utter negativity of the epistemic revolt, itself a response to the unstinting negation projected by *this* particular paradigm of a Eurocentrism which withholds and excludes absolutely. At the end of it all, Makak has exorcised the demons and phantoms of his bewitched, schizophrenic subjectivity; but he does so away in the mountains to which he now withdraws completely, into a private space of subjectivist autarky. He cannot be the "King of Africa", the "Conquering Lion of Judah" of his dreams since he has seen how hollow that turns out to be in a world never quite free of both Eurocentric "epistemic violence" and the giddy paroxyms of nihilistic revolt and manipulation which it engenders: *aut caesar, aut nihil.*

Although it has a much smaller cast of characters, *Pantomime* encapsulates a much more engrossing and dialectical frame of referents of epistemic Eurocentrism and its demythologization than *Dream on Monkey Mountain.* The dramaturgic "trick" employed to achieve this seems derived from the principles of dramatic form and performance styles developed by Athol Fugard and the South African anti-apartheid theatrical movement of Barney Simon, John Kani, Winston Ntshona, the Market Theatre and others; small casts of two or three characters constantly changing roles, constantly constructing and deconstructing, totalizing and detotalizing social wholes, social macrocosms and their fragments and microcosms. A "perfect" formalistic vehicle for a drama which seeks the epistemic deconstruction of the texts and signs of Eurocentrism.

The figural, metaphoric strategy which establishes *Pantomime* as a decisively different paradigm of epistemic demythologization than *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is that the "text" deployed in this play has been devised out of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* a classic "megatext" of Eurocentrism. Moreover, the roles are now reversed, a reversal significantly voluntarily proposed and *demanded* by the white character, Harry Trewe, a retired British actor who has removed himself from personal, domestic and professional disasters and decline in Britain to the island of Tobago in the Caribbean. Here he establishes the "Castaway Guest House" and hires a retired Trinidadian calypsonian and carnival maestro, Jackson Philip, as his "factotum". So as to draw guests to his decrepit establishment, Trewe devises an improvisational script reversing the roles, the identities, the figural binarisms of Defoe's classic text: the white Trewe will play Friday; the black Philip will play Crusoe. But Harry Trewe's project comes only partly out of business calculations; he is also a liberal, a progressive who insists on the edifying potentiality of such an entertainment for both the white tourists to the island and the local black Creole community:

> JACKSON
> That is white-man fighting. Anyway, Mr. Trewe, I feel the fun finish; I would like, with your permission, to get up now and fix up the sun deck. 'Cause when rain fall . . .
> HARRY
> Forget the sun deck. I'd say, Jackson, that we've come closer to a mutual respect, and that things need not get that hostile. Sit, and let me explain what I had in mind.
> JACKSON
> I take it that's an order?
> HARRY
> You want it to be an order? Okay, it's an order.
> JACKSON
> It didn't sound like no order.
> HARRY
> Look, I'm a liberal, Jackson. I've done the whole routine. Aldermaston, Suez, Ban the Bomb, Burn the Bra, Pity the Poor Pakis, et cetera. I've even tried jumping up to the steel band at Notting Hill Gate, and I'd no idea I'd wind up in this ironic position of giving orders, but if the new script I've been given says: HARRY TREWE, HOTEL MANAGER, then I'm going to play Harry Trewe, Hotel Manager, to the hilt, damnit. So *sit* down! Please. Oh, goddamnit, *sit . . . down . . .*
> (Jackson sits. Nods)
> Good. Relax. Smoke. Have a cup of tepid coffee. I sat up from about three this morning, working out this whole skit in my head.
> (Pause)
> Mind putting that hat on for a second, it will help my point. Come on. It'll make things clearer.
> (He gives Jackson the goatskin hat. Jackson, after a pause, puts it on)
> JACKSON
> I'll take that cigarette.
> (Harry hands over a cigarette)
> HARRY
> They've seen that stuff, time after time. Limbo, dancing girls, fire-eating . . .
> JACKSON
> Light.
> HARRY
> Oh, sorry.
> (He lights Jackson's cigarette)
> JACKSON
> I listening.
> HARRY
> We could turn this little place right here into a little cabaret, with some very witty acts. Build up the right audience. Get an edge on the others. So, I thought. Suppose I get this material down to two people. Me and . . . well, me and somebody else. Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday. We could work up a good satire, you know, on the master-servant — no offense — relationship. Labour-management, white-black, and so on . . . Making some trenchant points about topical things, you know.

Add that show to the special dinner for the price of one ticket . . .
(p. 107-109)

Things do not, of course, work out the way. Trewe's script envisions a revision of *Robinson Crusoe*. For one thing, Trewe's revision does not go far enough for Philip. Philip renames Friday Thursday. He renames all the props and paraphernalia of survival and "civilization" that master and servant, colonizer and colonized have to share. And he disagrees violently with Trewe over what spiritual qualities sustained Crusoe on the island and allows him to establish dominion over it, its flora and fauna, and Friday. The twists and turns, the explosive negative racial and cultural material thrown up by this encounter are made bearable and commensurable only by the powerfully enabling and metaphorically suggestive fact that both men have been actors, performers, entertainers. The performance idioms of the English music hall and the Trinidadian calypsonian carnival become vehicles of thorough going textual revisions of Defoe's classic novel and deconstructive assault on a vast array of cultural systems and codes which have defined the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized. At the end of it all, Trewe finds that the "pantomime" cannot be played innocently; there is too much at stake:

HARRY
Look, I'm sorry to interrupt you again, Jackson, but as I — you know — was watching you, I realized it's much more profound than that; that it could get offensive. We're trying to do something light, just a little pantomime, a little satire, a little picong. But if you take this thing seriously, we might commit Art, which is a kind of crime in this society . . . I mean, there'd be a lot of things there that people . . . well, it would make them think too much, and well, we don't want that . . . we just want a little . . . entertainment.
JACKSON
How do you mean, Mr. Trewe?
HARRY
Well, I mean if you . . . well, I mean. If you did the whole thing in reverse . . . I mean, okay, well, all right . . . you've got this black man . . . no, no . . . all right. You've got this man who is black, Robinson Crusoe, and he discovers this island on which there is this white cannibal, all right?
JACKSON
Yes. That is, after he has killed the goat . . .
HARRY
Yes, I know, I know. After he has killed the goat and made a . . . the hat, the parasol, and all of that . . . and, anyway, he comes across this man called Friday.
JACKSON
How do you know I mightn't choose to call him Thursday? Do I have to copy every . . . I mean, are we improvising?
HARRY
All right, so it's Thursday. He comes across this naked white cannibal called Thursday, you know. And then look at what would happen. He would have to start to . . . well, he'd have to, sorry . . . This cannibal, who is a Christian, would have to start unlearning his Christianity. He would have to be taught . . . I mean . . . he'd have to be taught by this — African . . . that everything was wrong, that what he was doing . . . I mean, for nearly two thousand years . . . was wrong. That his civilization, his culture, his whatever, was . . . *horrible*. Was all . . . wrong. Barbarous, I mean, you know. And Crusoe would then have to teach him things like, you know, about . . . Africa, his gods, patamba, and so on . . . and it would get very, very complicated, and I suppose ultimately it would be very boring, and what we'd have on our hands would be . . . would be a play and not a little pantomime . . .
JACKSON
I'm too ambitious?
HARRY
No, no, the whole thing would have to be reversed; white would become black, you know . . .
JACKSON
(Smiling)
You see, Mr. Trewe, I don't see anything wrong with that, up to now.
HARRY
Well, I do. It's not the sort of thing I want, and I think you'd better clean up, and I'm going inside, and when I come back I'd like this whole place just as it was. I mean, just before everything started.
JACKSON
You mean you'd like it returned to its primal state? Natural? Before Crusoe finds Thursday? But, you see, that is not history. That is not the world.
HARRY
No, no. I don't give an Eskimo's fart about the world, Jackson. I just want this little place here *cleaned. up*, and I'd like you to get back to fixing the sun deck. Let's forget the whole matter. Righto. Excuse me.
(p. 125-27)

The play however does not end on this note of a return to a "colonial" *status quo ante*, at least on the individual, person-to-person, existential level. Indeed, Trewe and Philip both ultimately abandon completely the distance, formality and protocols of employer and employee, "white" and "black", English and Creole that had prevented them from playing the revised text of *Robinson Crusoe* to the bitter end. And that is precisely the "point" of this play (is it?): There is a history of Eurocentrism; Eurocentrism is also *in* history, including significantly, present history; we can

neither innocently re-enact the text(s) of the "old" history, nor shake the texts of the "new" history completely free of the old texts. I think Walcott is suggesting that if this is the case, the point is not to lapse into despair or mutual isolation but to find the integrity to acknowledge the violence of that history. All the same, it is significant that both Trewe and Philip (and Walcott) back off from a complete engagement with the logic and dynamics of the *power,* or more appropriately, the will-to-power, that inheres in both the constructions of Eurocentrism and the deconstructions of oppositional nativist texts, codes and languages.

The two paradigms of the interrogation and contestation of Eurocentrism that we see in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *Pantomime* do not by any means exhaust the range of the literary exploration of epistemologies and discourses of colonization and decolonization in contemporary post-colonial writing. Where do we, for instance, place Achebe's *Arrow of God?* Ezeulu instantly recognizes the connection between the new religion, the new teaching and the incipient reconfigurations of power relationships generated by the new colonialism and its peculiar regime of peripheral, *administrative* capitalism (as distinct from the *settler* capitalism of colonialism in other parts of Africa). Ezeulu decides to send one son into tutelage of the new "teaching", to be on the safe side. But Ezeulu loses both ways: the new colonialism completely marginalises the great store of knowledge and wisdom that Ezeulu's priestly vocation and function draw upon (including lunar observations and calendrical calculations); it also presents him with a son, who having served his tutelage, comes with a dislocated subjectivity, an alien "soul". And where also, for another important text, do we place J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians?* The protagonist, the Magistrate, is a scion of a humane, skeptical, courageous and conscientized rationalism. As he contemplates the present history of (a particular) Empire running to its conclusion, he also ruminates on History. He does this by trying to unravel the message or meaning of the cryptic scripts and writing that his excavations of the ruins of a previous empire have thrown up. Yes, he muses, the "barbarians" will outlast "us", defeat "us" (we deserve defeat); but will "they" have the capacity and the inclination to understand or interpret "us" the way we have done "our" predecessors? One wonders what Ezeulu and the Magistrate would have had to say to each other if the accidents or contingencies of history or literary creation had brought such types into direct contact.

I see the value of these two paradigms as indicating some *sub- texts* for critical theory's engagement of Eurocentrism. One can only indicate these in a very general, condensed and schematic fashion here. First, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* suggests a nativist moralism in which the rejection of "Europe" and Eurocentrism is taken to its extreme limit. It is perhaps not unfair to see this as analogous to certain forms of the "Black Aesthetic" rubric of the Sixties and early Seventies in the United States, and certain expressions of the "decolonization" poetics in Africa in the Seventies and early Eighties, especially that associated with Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie in their famous (or notorious) book, *Toward the De-colonization of African Literature.* The underlying impulse here is a total change of nomenclature, models, inspiration; the

call for an autochthonous, pristine, originary aesthetic is so total that *any* trace or influence of European techniques and forms in literature, and any European critics and schools in literary criticism is condemned *ad initio.* I think *Dream on Monkey Mountain* effectively dramatizes the falsity and pitfalls of the "decolonization" claimed by this form of nativism.

Pantomime, I think, implies a radical relativism in its complete deconstruction of both Eurocentrism and nativism; this evidently recalls certain forms of post-structuralist and deconstructivist assault on essentialism and the "metaphysics of presence" in the canons, and the celebration of indeterminacy. As analogically dramatised in *Pantomime* this position invites its own "deconstruction" and interrogation: what is the value of a radical relativism which carries out a necessary demythologization of essentialized Eurocentrism and nativism but evades or occludes the violence of the power relations between them by tacitly assuming an equivalence of either actual power consolidation between them, or the will-to-power of their pundits and adherents? Let us reinscribe this interrogation into its concrete articulation in the global balance of forces of world literature study at the present time: what differentiated consolidations and sedimentation of power do we encounter in the world of global institutional cultural politics between, say, Derrida, de Man and the Euro-American deconstructors and post-structuralists on the one hand, and Chinweizu and his "decolonizing" nativists on the other?

A POEM IN HOMAGE TO AN UNWANTED MAN

D.J.R. Bruckner

In Derek Walcott's new 325-page poem, *Omeros*, the principal characters are Achille, Hector and Helen, and other characters also have names taken from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. Much of the action, which occurs in the Caribbean, but also in North America, Africa and Europe through many centuries, gains resonance from its references to incidents in those epics. And Mr. Walcott chose for his title the Greek version of the name Homer. But when critics call it an epic he objects.

"I do not think of it as an epic," Mr. Walcott said in a recent interview in New York. "Certainly not in the sense of epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few, I suppose. But 'epic' makes people think of great wars and great warriors. That isn't the Homer I was thinking of; I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas."

For him *Omeros* is homage, meant to capture "the whole experience of the people of the Caribbean." Mr. Walcott was born in the Windward Islands 60 years ago and received his education at St. Mary's College in St. Lucia and then at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica.

When he was 20 years old, his first play was produced in St. Lucia, and by the time he was 30 he had published two volumes of poetry, established the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and his plays were being performed throughout the Caribbean and in London.

As his fame grew, so did the time he spent abroad. In the last decade, he has spent most of each year in Boston, teaching at Boston University. Now when he returns home, he finds that the place, its people and its history overwhelm him. "I know how this is going to sound, but it is true," he said. "What drove me was duty: duty to the Caribbean light. The whole book is an act of gratitude. It is a fantastic privilege to be in a place in which limbs, features, smells, the lineaments and presence of the people are so powerful. If I could only capture, in painting or words or any way, some of the women's faces."

"I saw a 75-year-old fisherman with a chest like iron plates. There is a tremendous sensual excitement. And there is no history for the place. It's pristine. You feel like

Piero della Francesca. It's an early morning feeling. You're writing something down, but you're not really making it; it's there."

Tampering with what is there produces pangs of conscience. "One reason I don't like talking about an epic is that I think it is wrong to try to ennoble people," he said. "And just to write history is wrong. History makes similes of people, but these people are their own nouns." More precisely, they are becoming nouns in his analysis.

"I learned what a noun is, writing this book," he said. "No one is Adam. A noun is not a name you give something. It is something you watch becoming itself, and you have to have the patience to find out what it is. In the Caribbean, people come from everywhere, from Africa and Europe and the Mediterranean and the Middle East and the Orient." He himself derives from a background that is African, British and Dutch.

"There really are names like Hector and Achille in the Caribbean," he said. "Someone would see a slave and say 'he looks like a Pompey so we'll call him Pompey.' The place is full of slave names. But then we become our names. It's O.K. to be Smith. You don't own me because you call me that; I *am* Smith. There is a restless identity in the New World. The New World needs an identity without guilt or blame."

It sometimes seems he thinks the New World needs a whole new language, too, and he is supplying a great deal of it. But that, too, he credits to his home waters. It is not simply that the Creole patois of the islands changes pronunciations of many words in other tongues (the three syllables of the name Achilles, for instance, become ah-SHEEL in the Antilles), but Mr. Walcott contends that the sea itself affects the rhythm of the islanders' speech.

His use of the vernacular allows him to scatter hundreds of verbal jokes through his poems and plays. He has often been praised for his ability to fuse the classics, folklore and history and to combine the vernacular and the grand manner. And the sheer range of *Omeros* — the enormous variety of its language, verse structure and narrative techniques — makes it an epitome of all the writing done by this man, of whom the Nobel Prize-winning poet Joseph Brodsky wrote "he is the very man by whom the English language lives."

But the story began rather simply. Several years ago, Mr. Walcott was in St. Lucia "at a time when, I remember, there was a lot of rain."

"A very good friend of mine had died," he continued, "an actor, and I was thinking about that. And where this poem started was with the figure of Philoctetes, the man with the wound, alone on the beach: Philoctetes from the Greek legend and Timon of Athens as well." In Homer and in a play by Sophocles, Philoctetes was abandoned on an island by his Greek companions on the way to the Trojan war after a snake bit him, leaving him with an unhealable wound so noisome no one could stand being near him. But the gods decided the war could not be won without him, and the men who deserted him had to return and beg him, wound and all, to go to Troy. The moral questions raised by that myth give a sharp edge to some of the confrontations in Mr. Walcott's poem.

If the beginning of *Omeros* was simple, the poem soon began to grow, and

eventually it "got to be like a mural, with all kinds of spaces to be filled in by action," Mr. Walcott said. His comparison of it to a picture is natural. In addition to being a poet and playwright, Mr. Walcott is a painter, an occupation he finds increasingly satisfying since "in painting you don't have to go through a process of opinion; it speaks directly and either it works or it doesn't."

In fact, he speaks of *Omeros* primarily in visual terms. He has written a number of film scripts through the years and said "the sense of cutting, the visual rhythm of films affected the structure of this book." Parts of the story, he added, he "would love to have made a film of," and he was thinking about film when he wrote them.

And, of course, he was thinking about writers: Homer and Dante, the only other poet he mentions and whom he loves for the Italian poet's love of the sea, his mastery of action in narrative and what Mr. Walcott calls "the gift of a phrase that can summarize an entire life." But he also acknowledged the influence of an unlikely trio — Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway.

"I learned a lot in writing this poem," he said. "I did not realize how much great prose I had absorbed into my nervous verse system. When I began to write in hexameter lines and in stanzas, well the structure is there in the architecture of the best turn-of-the century prose, in Conrad and Kipling. And you find in them the wit of the paragraph; mentally, it keeps the rhythm up. "So, the solidity I felt behind me was the solidity of prose. I wanted the feel of great prose rather than of a strong verse line." He has a special affection for Hemingway because "he is the only one to let you see the Caribbean the way it is, to feel it and smell it."

"No one has written about it better," he continued. "When I was writing this book, you might say I was thinking of the two great Caribbean artists, Hemingway and Homer." But above all, he said he was thinking of the people and their islands. No character is a precise evocation of any individual he knows, but readers of his other work will recognize a few who have turned up in other poems, especially an expatriate British Army officer trying, in Mr. Walcott's words, "to expiate the historical respect" paid to European colonial representatives by the rest of the population.

Some of the most memorable, dazzling characters are birds. Sewed into a quilt that becomes the universe by an old woman — who, unlike Penelope in the *Odyssey*, does not unravel her work every night — they take flight and fill the skies of the book the way old gods filled the skies of Homer.

The origin of them is a reminder one is looking at the work of a poet, for Mr. Walcott is not a bird watcher. A friend of his gave him a pamphlet listing all the birds of the Caribbean, he said, "and there were so many it amazed me, and then I found myself thinking about the scansion in the list, the rhythm, and so, there they are."

But the greatest character is the Caribbean Sea itself. "The Caribbean is an immense ocean that just happens to have a few islands in it," Mr. Walcott said. "The people have an immense respect for it, awe of it." And his own vision of the world is shaped by waves. In fact, this summer, he said, "is the first time I had been around mountains." "I was in Colorado," he said. "At first I didn't know what bothered me about them. But then I noticed it: whole ranges of mountains, stacks of them, and they never move."

To the end, he insists that he is not an epic poet. "The happiness I feel about this book is that I didn't force classical reverberations or stretch to make associations with the classics. It is a book for people, not a conundrum for scholars. It was as if I was learning to read Homer when I was writing it."