

A Different "Growth of a Poet's Mind" Derek Walcott's *Another Life*

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DEREK Walcott's *Another Life* is one of the major poems of our time. A critic cannot prove a poem's worth, but readers "will find soon and constantly," to borrow the words of Northrop Frye,¹ that Walcott "is a more rewarding and suggestive poet to work with than" most other contemporary poets in English. As an autobiography of the development of a poet's mind, Walcott's *Another Life* insists upon comparison with Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The very great differences between the two poetic autobiographies would be less striking were there no underlying similarities.

Yet it is impossible to call Walcott Wordsworthian, or his poem an imitation of *The Prelude*. Rather it is *another* "growth of a poet's mind," *another* life and a different world. Transcendentalism, with its sense of unity and divinity in Nature, its insistence on the primacy of Nature, and its sense of the unity and divinity of man as a basis for revolutionary idealism, is absent from *Another Life*. If by some lights Walcott's poem seems more revolutionary than Wordsworth's, by other lights it is more conservative. Wordsworth's poet-hero is a well-to-do middle-class idealist saddened by the examples of human misery which he beholds illuminated, dignified, and somehow distanced by natural beauty or Lake Country mists. But the Walcott hero, also technically middle-class (his cultivated, widowed mother works as a laundress), lives among the poverties and the individualities of the poor; except by education he is one of them. And he sees not, primarily, superstition and outworn forms

of unrepresentative government as the causes of oppression, but human greed and, the coinage of the poor, envy. In the Walcott hero's earliest memories the holiness of the individual is inextricably linked with grotesque ignobility, immortal diamond with jackstraw, as Hopkins reminds us. For Walcott's hero nature neither inspires nobility nor solaces grief. That oppressions, stupidities, and the inequities of wealth should be combatted he affirms, but there is for the Walcott hero, unlike the young Wordsworth, no imaginable political rearrangement that can cure all things and no humane unhuman harmonies hinted through nature's veils.

The *Prelude* is primarily about a youth discovering and qualifying his perceptions in order to give material to his voice; it is about a search for a matured philosophy based upon the development of feeling by nature and by human experience. In *Another Life* the youth is not primarily looking for a philosophy but for an art, not for the materials but the voice. The search for and development of a voice, a technique, necessarily involves some philosophic inquiry, but a philosophy, as a way of ordering perception, is not the object of the inquiry. The crisis point in *The Prelude* has to do with the relationship of an idealistic philosophy with the perceptions of experience, but the crisis of *Another Life* has to do with the relationship of the artist's ambitions to his possible audience. The audience never appears as a problem in Wordsworth's poem; in Walcott's, it is a problem throughout — the people for whom the artist creates reject his art.

The despair at the crisis of Wordsworth's poem was felt, as he lets us know, by many of his generation; he was not alone in his youthful idealism. Nevertheless in *The Prelude* the hero's despair figures as the crisis of the poetic imagination, an injury to the faith necessary for the production of poetry. In Walcott's poem, however, despair figures as an essential element of island life. The folk as well as the artist suffer a kind of

orphaning, a loss of faith in self, a crippling despair. Yet in both poems the crisis of despair basically results from the confrontation of the poet's ambition and *agape* with spiritually crippling and crippled worlds, and both poems end with renewal, with dedications to dear and sharing friends, and with the reaffirmations of the vital, creative love which is the core of both poetries, Wordsworth's and Walcott's.

Walcott has never been a poet to reject the multiteity of his inheritance. Deliberately, throughout *Another World*, he reminds us of *The Prelude* and the *Lyrical Ballads*, of the Romantic poetry that formed the basis of his literary education and the Romantics' concern with making a poetry out of the real language of real men and everyday materials. The third chapter of *Another Life*, with its lists of heroes at once pathetic and noble, may remind us of Wordsworth's peasants, though Walcott's are more grotesque. Similarly Walcott's "child who sets his half-shell afloat/ in the brown creek that is Rampanalgas River" (p. 143)² reminds us of Wordsworth's blind Highland boy with his turtle shell on Loch Leven. Perhaps the most striking resemblance between Wordsworth's poetry and Walcott's is the piety toward place and the people of that place, an impulse that identifies the poetic intention with *agape* that, rooted in a sense of "home", expands to include mankind. *Eros*, largely absent from *The Prelude*, is very much present in *Another Life*, but only as a part of life, not as the initial or major impetus toward poetry. In both poems not *eros* but *agape* creates the need to write.

But between Wordsworth's and Walcott's love for their fellow man there are fundamental differences. For Wordsworth brotherly love tends always towards a kind of generalization:

How oft, amid those overflowing streets
 Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
 Unto myself, "The face of every one
 That passes by me is a mystery!"
 Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed

By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
 Until the shapes before my eyes became
 A second-sight procession, such as glides
 Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
 And once . . .
 Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten
 Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)
 Of a Blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
 Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
 Wearing a written paper, to explain
 His story, whence he came, and who he was.
 Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
 As with the might of waters; an apt type
 This label seemed of the utmost we can know,
 Both of ourselves and of the universe;
 And on the shape of that unmoving man,
 His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
 As if admonished from another world.

(*The Prelude*, Book VII, 11, 626-49)³

The differences between Wordsworth's blind man and a blind man in *Another Life* include the difference between stranger and neighbour, and a different approach to the sense of the otherness of the blind man's world, in Walcott not through philosophy but through sensuous identification. Moreover, Walcott's vision is not coloured by Nature's education (still mountains, moving waters) but by Art:

Now, seal your eyes, and think of Homer's grief.
 Darnley,
 skin freckled like a mango leaf,
 feels the sun's fingers press his lids.
 His half-brother Russell steers him by the hand.
 Seeing him, I practice blindness.
 Homer and Milton in their owl-blind towers,
 I envy him his great affliction. Sunlight
 whitens him like a negative. (p. 18)

Wordsworth's peasants are not freckled, and the poet feels for them rather than in them. For Wordsworth it is the "other-world" which, hinting through the stranger's face, is divine. But for Walcott it is the specificity, the this-worldness of the individual that is divine. The great visions of *Another World* are not visions of unity within and beyond multitude, as in *The Prelude*, but of the precociousness, the "glory," of the real.

But what is "the real"? For Wordsworth the "real" is defined by the profound simplicity that underlies exper-

ience. For example, in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explains:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart . . . speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated . . . The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust), because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society . . . they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.⁵

Thus Wordsworth listened for a language somehow more "real" than patois, slang, or intellectual jargon. But in speech, as in faces, it is the freckles that matter to Walcott, the details, the unsimplified colours. (And of course the poor of Walcott's other world are not Wordsworth's peasants who, being neither Celts nor West Indians, may have lacked the impulse for eloquence.)

Interestingly, it is not the details of Nature but those of Art that most inspire Walcott's budding poet. Nature led the Wordsworth hero toward the transcendent sublime, but Art led the Walcott hero toward the concrete sublime. Thus Walcott's blind beggar furnishes no vision of eternity but instead a sensuous image with a heroic quality drawn from literature. Sharing with *The Prelude's* hero a considerable interest in the lives of the poor, but lacking Wordsworth's philosophy and his kindly condescension to other ranks, the hero of *Another Life* constructs out of neighbourhood gossip a Homeric alphabet of heroes, and his own *Arabian Nights*. Pity is subsequent to aesthetic appreciation. The painter pre-empts philosophy.

Yet Walcott's painterly poet is not hard-hearted. Indeed he is more involved with other human beings than is the poet-hero of *The Prelude*, and more dependent on them. The Wordsworth hero's affection for his friends, Coleridge, Dorothy, and the rest, is always a little con-

descending, even at its warmest; above friendship the hero cherishes solitude, with the sense of closeness to Nature that it provides him. But in Walcott human relationships are at all times the central concern. *Another Life* is less self-centred than *The Prelude*; the poet's friends' lives parallel and interact with the speaker's; they are also the poem's heroes, and they center the poem on themselves where they figure in it. Walcott's solitaries are only alone — without serenity, faith, or the comforts of natural piety. Their solitude represents a breakdown of human relationships. Even when chosen by an artist who desires to live close to nature, solitude remains primarily a condition of having been abandoned; it has nothing to say, and brings not bliss but pain.

But in *Another Life* as in *The Prelude* the artist, alone, may be granted vision. At the age of fourteen Walcott's boy hero climbed a small hill and "dissolved into a trance" (p. 42). He encounters no Presence, no intimations of immortality, but thoughts too deep for tears:

I was seized by a pity more profound
 than my young body could bear, I climbed
 with the labouring smoke.
 I drowned in labouring breakers of bright cloud,
 then uncontrollably I began to weep,
 inwardly, without tears, with a serene extinction
 of all sense; I felt compelled to kneel,
 I wept for nothing and for everything,
 I wept for the earth of the hill under my knees,
 for the grass, the pebbles, for the cooking smoke
 above the labourers' houses like a cry,
 for unheard avalanches of white cloud,
 but "darker grows the valley, more and more forgetting."
 For their lights still shine through the hovels like litmus,
 the smoking lamp still slowly says its prayer,
 the poor still move behind their tinted scrim,
 the taste of water is still shared everywhere,
 but in that ship of night, locked in together,
 through which, like chains, a little light might leak,
 something still fastens us forever to the poor. (pp. 42-3)

Directly after this Wordsworthian vision of the other life of the poor comes a question Wordsworth does not ask:

But which was the true light?
 Blare noon or twilight,

"the lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,"
or the cold
iron entering the soul, as the soul sank
out of belief. (p. 43)

In what light are these poor to be seen? The emphasis is not philosophic but aesthetic. Moreover these poor are the poet's own people, his other selves; the vision includes a problem of self-knowledge. It includes also, as fundamental difficulty, a recognition that the art through which the boy has learned to see is alien to this other world. The European paintings of peasants at evening obviously influence the West Indian eye. But Palmer's light or Wordsworth's daffodils speak to the English eye without an effect of artifice, exoticism, or unreality. And Wordsworth's vision of the English poor was unimpeded by a heritage of slavery. But for the West Indian his English language and his English cultural tradition are not one with the nature in which he lives or the body he inhabits; they belong to another world, to a different life, in which the West Indian is not heir but bastard. "I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy" (p. 77), Walcott writes. From such a viewpoint the world of traditional art, "all that romantic taxidermy" (p. 41), is alien, inadequate, and worse, distorting; it can make what is local and real for the houseboy seem less beautiful than what is local and real for the European in Europe. The West Indian has to learn how to look at his own people. He must invent his own inheritance — not the blue Aegean but the blue Caribbean, not Wordsworth's rainbowed mists but the tropics' evening gleam.

Towards the opening of the poem and again at the close, Walcott quotes the West Indian writer Alejo Carpentier on the New World artist's task as "Adam's task of giving things their names" (p. 152). By naming, Adam creates for things another life. The subject of Walcott's autobiographical poem on the growth of a poet's mind must necessarily also be about the birth of an art which will legitimately recreate the other life of the West Indies,

the other world of the poet's youth. *The Prelude*, on the other hand, does not have to give a great deal of attention to the poet's problems of learning his craft, or of discovering and using his inheritance, or of adjusting his attitude towards the seducing world of an exotic art. The pansy-pensée at Wordsworth's feet is both a real flower and a set of cultural associations; he can afford to move from it towards the grand generalizations. But the West Indian artist has to use floral material naked of reference; he must give it its past. He must invent particularities.

Yet the West Indian artist cannot create his art wholly from scratch. To deny any part of himself, European, African, or islander, would be a form of suicide. Art first created this other world of the artist's sensibility, and the world of art takes on another life, here, rerooted in the island soil. *Another Life* is a celebration of the power of art, and in this respect, represents a reversal of Wordsworth's concern with the "real" language of ordinary men. Far from simplifying the language toward the essential, Walcott expands the language, using and reinvigorating the whole of the heritage, from Latin to patois to literary coinage:

"Well, I apply, but all dem big boys so, dem ministers,
dem have their side. Cockroach must step aside
to give fowl chance." (p. 126)

then, when he ulyseed, she bloomed again. (p. 3)

And in the description of children at Anse-la-Raye as "pot-stomached, dribbling, snotted,/starved, fig-navelled, mud-baked cherubim" we recognize the Italian *putti*, the European art which makes us see children as angelic and as fig-navelled, and the West Indian reality, that pot stomachs are the signs of malnutrition. Similar efforts to expand rather than to contract the language are seen in the names given to the poet-speaker's fellow, best friend, and semi-self, the painter Dunstan St. Omer, who has the West Indian school-boy nickname "Apilo" and is given by the poet the name "Gregorias" to convey a sense of

Omer's being a "black Greek" (p. 51) full of creative energy.⁵

The epigraph to *Another Life*, a passage from the West Indian writer Edouard Glissant, states that after "I can finally translate [my memories] into words, then I shall perceive the unique and essential quality of this place." Art precedes perception. This is the answer Walcott's poem provides to the young boy's question at age fourteen. Malraux has said that the world of art is another world, but a world which contains our essential qualities. And Eluard has said, "There is another world, but it is this one." Walcott's poet-protagonist early glimpses "another life" in the lines of the Jamaican poet, Campbell: "Sacred be/ the black flax of a black child (p. 7). Walcott's title is thus multi-meaninged; the poem is another autobiography (a life); it is about the other life of art, the estrangement of the artist's life, and, of course, the new life entered toward the conclusion of the poem to which the poem is, as in Wordsworth's autobiography, prelude.

It is not theory but practice that makes the other world of art, and Walcott's novel-like poem is full of technical concerns with colour and language. The poet and Gregorias study painting together under the same mentor, Harry Simmons, although the poet discovers that he "lived in a different gift,/ its element metaphor (p. 59). The poet is more influenced by history and literature and more attracted to classical and European art than is his friend, who possessed

aboriginal force and it came
as the carver comes out of the wood.
Now, every landscape we entered
was already signed with his name. (p. 59)

The two friends swear

that we would never leave the island
until we had put down, in paint, in words,
as palmists learn the network of a hand,
all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines,
every neglected, self-pitying inlet
muttering in brackish dialects. . . . (p. 52)

This working together, in paint, in words, has produced a painter's poetry. For example, the two friends get drunk

while the black, black-sweatered, horn-soled fishermen
 drank their l'absinthe in sand back yards standing up,
 on the clear beer of sunrise,
 on cheap, tannic Canaries muscatel,
 on glue, on linseed oil, on kerosene,
 on Van Gogh's shadow rippling on a cornfield,
 on Cezanne's boots grinding the stones of Aix
 to shales of slate, ochre and Vigie blue,
 on Gauguin's hand shaking the gin-coloured dew
 from the umbrella yams,
 garrulous, all day, sun-struck,
 till dusk glazed vision with its darkening varnish.

(p. 51)

But the lives of the two friends take different paths. As in *The Prelude* the poet of *Another Life* leaves the country of his childhood, and this departure, and the re-discoveries upon return, are significant to the poet's education and to the structure of the poem. But the secondary hero, the painter, does not leave the West Indies. Conscious of his greater independence of European culture, and expressing indifference to his lack of audience, Gregorias affirms:

"Man I ent care if they misunderstand me,
 I drink my rum, I praise my God, I mind my business!
 The thing is you love death and I love life." (p. 64)

Yet in the poem Gregorias subsequently ventures nearer to suicide than does the melancholy poet.

The poet has felt obliged to seek his further education and a wider audience outside the world of his childhood. As the West Indian writer, Alejo Carpentier, has his hero learn in *The Lost Steps* (to which Walcott alludes), the artist may not live wholly in the other life of childhood, or nature, or island simplicity. Moreover, if his audience is not at home, exile is a bitter necessity. Yet leaving home is a kind of betrayal; art seems, in *Another Life*, necessarily to involve betrayal; each of the secondary protagonists is in some sense betrayed by the hero, or so he feels, by or for the sake of art. Closely related to the problem of betrayal is the estrangement of the ex-colonial artist from his own people, a major theme of

Another Life. The neglect and subsequent breakdown and suicide of the "astigmatic saint" (p. 52) Harry Simmons are a consequence of this estrangement.

Of course any country schooled to think of itself as second-rate will expect its artists to fail. But the West Indian poet has unique political vulnerabilities because of the slave past which is his own and the white tongue that must be the medium of his art and whose literature has controlled the attitudes of his culture without providing a sense of his own dignity. His African or Indian heritage is as foreign to him as his British heritage, and the history of racism is used for the "nurturing of scars" (p. 127). Out of such a history and such an education, how will the heroic be believed possible? Or out of such desire, how will truth be politically acceptable? The poet's loyalties are divided between two worlds: "What else was he but a divided child?" (p. 41).

The loyalties of the divided child are embodied in *Another Life* in two figures: Harry Simmons, and the poet's first wife, Anna. Harry, the brown painter of brown people, is associated with the island's world and with the brilliant colours of the tropics' soil and sun. (But Harry's saints are the European artists of tropical colour and of exile, Gauguin and Van Gogh). Anna is associated with the classical world of European art, the blond angels of Angelico, the pale colours of moonlight and twilight hours, with the heroines of English and Russian novels, with the non-West Indian images of wheat fields and snow. Yet both dark Harry and golden Anna are of mixed blood,⁷ both become symbolic of the island's nature for the poet, and both become weary with their island lives. Harry, bored with his canvases, no longer wanting "what he could become" (p. 120), commits suicide. Anna, bored with the island, enters a nursing order and becomes "married to the sick,/ knowing one husband, pain" (p. 99). But Gregorias, the poet's other self, bored with "his own self-exhaustion" (p. 131), rejects suicide and re-enters life.

(A parallel re-entry might be seen in Coleridge's "Dejection, an Ode," as a response to Wordsworth's affirmations.) Walcott's *Another Life* concludes, as does *The Prelude*, with the poet's return to his own country, with his reunion with friends, with a marriage, with an affirmation of all loyalties and a recommitment to the gift of art and to a new life. Only despair is rejected.

A great many thematic and visual patterns unite Walcott's long poem, and all tend to emphasize a harmony based on duality rather than on unity. Patterns of opposites balance and qualify each other, mirroring the dividedness of the poet's heritage: the sun and the moon, the earth and the sea, the West Indian reality and the European myth of the tropics, the local and the heroic, the past and the present. Patterns of birth, death, and re-birth recur, particularly in relation to fire, sunlight, or fiery suffering — mystic transcendence envisioned as light-filled and as searing. The unity is Heraclitean rather than transcendental. Each of the minor characters seems to stand, in miniature, as an emblem of the island — the dying miser Manoir, the lepers' priest, Gregorias's soldier father, the old woman who posed for Harry's painting dancing "with a spine like the 'glory cedar'" (p. 135) — each of these has on one hand the illness, the isolation, the despair, and on the other the strength and the grandeur: "the reek of the *tristes tropiques*" (p. 38).

The elaborate patterning of theme and imagery, the luxuriant and suggestive colour values, the richness of the allusions to painting, music, literature, and history, and above all, the eloquence of Walcott's language make *Another Life* one of the most beautiful poems of this generation. But nowadays a sense of beauty sometimes seems to belong only to wild-life conservationists. Many of our painters, musicians, and poets mirror only migraine: as though we must distrust beauty if suffering or stupidity be real. We seem to have created an artistic perception which cannot respond to the "luxe, calme, et volupté" of

Baudelaire's tropical ideal; we seem to be stifled in mourning, like the young poet of *Another Life* who says he had "dressed too early for the funeral of this life" (p. 139). But the poet learns

Yet, when I continue to see
the young deaths of others,
even of lean old men, perpetually young,
when the alphabet I learnt as a child
will not keep its order . . .
there is something which balances. . . . (p. 138)

For Nature and Art will not allow a perpetual funeral: "the same day will persist in being good" (p. 122), and life insists upon being celebrated.

Another Life ends with three moments of near-transcendental visionary elation, moments of joy and dedication: one on a hilltop at evening, "I was struck like rock, and I opened/ to his gift!" (pp. 139-140); one in the "roar" of the morning sun like a phoenix's pyre (p. 146); and one walking, a "calm" and "renewed, exhausted man," with his daughters along a beach (p. 147). These sublime, dedicatory moments are matched only by those of *The Prelude*. Walcott's poetry has something of the healing power Arnold attributed to Wordsworth's, in spite of Walcott's painfully bought knowledge that art "can console but not enough," as he writes in the poem "Sea Grapes." Nor, says Walcott, can Nature console enough.

For in Walcott's poem, unlike in *The Prelude*, Nature is no friend, no mother, no guardian angel, no divinity. It is impersonal, ugly or beautiful or dull as may be. Only human love remains, and that not always. What persists "in being good" (p. 122) is life itself — not mankind, nature, religion, or art. All things assist the education of the child — the commitments of love, the pursuit of art, the passage of time; reborn by these to a new life, the hero sees the essential quality of his world, immanent, not transcendent.

in the island, there, still dancing like the old woman
was the glory, the *gloricidia*. (p. 150)

What the poem's epigraph from Glissant⁸ predicted, the poem makes come true:

On the day when I finally fasten my hands upon its wrinkled stem and pull with irresistible power, when my memories are quiet and strong, and I can finally translate them into words, then I shall perceive the unique and essential quality of this place. The innumerable petty miseries, the manifold beauties eclipsed by the painful necessity of combat and birth, these will be no more than the network of down-growing branches of a banyan tree, winding about the sea.

NOTES

¹*Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 25; Frye's own examples are, of course, Milton and Blackmore.

²Derek Walcott, *Another Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973). All page references will be to this edition.

³*The Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932).

⁴*Ibid*, p. 791.

⁵Edward Baugh tells us that "Apilo" is an unromantic school-boy nickname, in his review of *Another Life* in the *Caribbean Quarterly*, 21 (September 1975), 58.

⁶Other important themes are; negritude, the Red Indian past, the decay of empire, the European myth of the New World, the policies of poverty, and, in particular, the prolonged influences of familial, social, and sexual personal relationships.

⁷That Anna, too, is of mixed blood, H. F. A. Boxill has told me.

⁸Edouard Glissant, *Le Lezarde (The Ripening)*.