

*Flowers in the Shadow:
Derek Walcott and the Poetics of
“We little nations”*

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We little nations, we
live in the shadow of
the towers of Babylon, we
have no power, we're
a flower in the shadow of
a mighty banyan tree.
(Walcott, *O Babylon!* 221-22)

DEACON DOXY'S "Song to Sufferer" in Derek Walcott's play *O Babylon!* frames the issue: pinned beneath the authority of cultural superpowers and steeped in economic and political disadvantage, Caribbean nations seem doomed to neo-colonial impotence, their cultural achievements unremarked by the global arbiters of artistic merit. Perhaps most troubling for Caribbean writers is the realization that their various cultures have emerged into a dense cloud of signs thrown up by the operation of American cultural industries, the fallout of empire, and that the attempt to find a socially delineating voice capable of accurately encoding a uniquely Caribbean consciousness must be enacted using the discursive hand-me-downs of Trollope and Froude, however inherently ambivalent these may be. But even Deacon Doxy's dolorous appraisal points to the obvious truth: despite apparently being chained to an imperial history they themselves had no part in writing, and chronicling their world in a language coded by slave traders and overseers, West Indians have brought a singular culture to full bloom, albeit in the shadow of their towering neighbours. Though broadly similar conditions exist throughout the post-colonial world, Derek Walcott and other Caribbean poets argue the

existence of a unique and fundamental discontinuity in the region between perception and the methods used to interpolate that perception; they argue also that this semantic void provides an unscripted aesthetic space in which authentic cultural self-definition may occur.

The brutal zest with which the European imperial machine extracted raw materials from the West Indies obliterated almost all trace of indigenous society, and along with it the cultural sensibility that had evolved with the region's geography. The alien modes of representation which replaced the indigenous sensibility, though supposedly modified to suit their new and unprecedented surroundings, proved ineffectual in compassing the Carribean, leaving twentieth-century West Indians "without the syllabic intelligence to describe a hurricane" (Brathwaite 8) but nonetheless convinced that "the hurricane does not roar in pentameters" (Brathwaite 10). Walcott has been especially tenacious in attempting to exploit this discontinuity, postulating the existence of a naturalistic, perhaps animistic, code operating in St. Lucia and many other Caribbean nations upon which dominant global codes have not been impressed. In *Omeros*, Walcott struggles to develop and implement a verse form and allusional matrix capable of accurately and empathetically engaging his natural surroundings, and thus to bring his poetic voice into alignment with the voice of St. Lucia, a voice that Walcott conceives of as a blend of human and natural agency. St. Lucian society is defined in part by the way its development has been guided by this animist discourse which the society has intuitively known to exist but into which it could never gain complete entry.

Ultimately, any articulation of this interplay must presumably be textualized. Walcott cannot devise a poetic method that literally transcribes natural agency, that provides a line-by-line transcription of the animist discourse or that operates as a transparent window on St. Lucian landscape:

the West Indian poet is faced with a language he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language and because the closer he brings hand and word to the precise inflections of the inner language and to the subtlest accuracies of his ear the more chaotic his symbols will appear on the page. ("The Muse of History" 13)

But he can attempt to employ a poetic strategy that is well suited to examination of the role this animist code has played and

continues to play in the development of West Indian consciousness and culture, and of the manner in which it destabilizes theoretical boundaries between perception and cognition by introducing an intuitive component. Though poetry can never escape its own textuality to provide direct access to the objects of perception, Walcott has never stopped driving towards a signifying system specifically applicable to the Caribbean, one that can render the natural context of the islands partially readable. Much of the *Sea Grapes* collection presupposes such a shared code, and the last lines of the volume, the conclusion of "To Return to the Trees," form one of Walcott's most concise expressions of this approach:

I can read only in fragments
of broken bark, his
heroes tempered by whirlwinds,

who see with the word
senex, with its two eyes,
through the boles of this tree,

beyond joy,
beyond lyrical utterance,
this obdurate almond

going I under the sand
with this language, slowly,
by sand grains, by centuries.
(*Poems* 341, lines 46-57)

These lines illustrate the importance of the attempt to create a shared code which renders natural phenomena articulate and a concomitant aesthetic space in which poetic expression and its referent may commingle. This project has drawn a good deal of critical ire:

Walcott can never utterly put to rest his desire to write like the sun, or like the ocean, which "h[as] no memory of the wanderings of Gilgamesh / or whose sword severed whose head in *The Iliad*" (296). Sometimes, as in much of *Sea Grapes*, he even claims momentarily to achieve such transparency. More often, and more reasonably, he conveys its impossibility. (Terada 241-42 n.7)

It seems the poet is only to be judged reasonable in so far as he agrees with the theoretical disposition of the critic. It is perhaps worth wondering when society came to demand its poets be

reasonable. More to the point, Terada's commentary emphasizes the conundrum with which Walcott's work confronts critics. The inference is that Walcott must constantly battle his misguided instinct to attempt to generate an intuitive poetic discourse capable of interrogating objective phenomena on their own terms, a poetic method of reading nature and of comprehensively articulating the knowledge so gained. Apparently, Walcott never completely masters these impulses. The ensuing lapses of judgement produce moments of intellectual naïveté and ill-considered poetry which must simply be forgiven.

But if this is the case, then a great deal of Walcott's poetry must be forgiven. In his earliest work, Walcott shows a propensity to attempt to detextualize his response to nature, and to adopt a poetic method the effectiveness of which is tied to its insistence on the intermingling of human / subjective and natural / phenomenal discourse:

you kneel before
The sessile invocation of the thrush, the sibilant yew trees,
By broken and flaked languages, near a drying river,
You practice the pieties of your conquerors

O for a voice, not
A brood of tin throats on a wire branch,
cavalier attitudes, Don Juan, Dung Guano, O for
The swallow's arrowing to honest expulsion.

("Canto IV," *Epitaph* 10)

Though clearly apprentice pieces, "Canto IV" and the rest of *Epitaph for the Young* nevertheless hold the seeds of what would become a major thrust of the poet's mature work. The notion that colonialism had provided an idiom ill-equipped to engage the West Indian context, that the conquerors had alienated themselves and their underlings from the indigenous natural discourse of the islands, and that the legacy of this dislocation continues to haunt those who would depict accurately West Indian reality is central to the collection, as is the attempt, difficult though it is, to re-establish a connection, to find a voice. The pursuit of a mode of expression capable of rendering the "invocation of the thrush" knowable is not just desirable, but essential if the Caribbean is ever to be unbowed "before a bitter god" ("Canto IV" 10). This

ideology becomes ever more sophisticated in Walcott's work as he evolves a poetic idiom capable of more fully supporting it. In a great deal of his later work, perception of the interchange of nature becomes a central preoccupation:

Squat on a damp rock round which white lilies stiffen,
 pricking their ears; count as the syllables drop
 like dew from primeval ferns; note how the earth drinks
 language as precious, depending upon the race.
 Then, on dank ground, using a twig for a pen,
 write Genesis and watch the Word begin.
 Elephants will mill at their water hole to trumpet a
 new style. Mongoose, arrested in rut,
 and saucer-eyed mandrills, drinking from the leaves,
 will nod as a dew-lapped lizard discourses on "Lives
 of the Black Poets," gripping a branch for a lectern for better
 delivery. Already, up in that simian Academe,
 a chimp in bifocals, his lower lip a jut,
 tears misting the lenses, is turning your *Oeuvres Complètes*.
 (Midsummer LI: 8-21)

Once more, the establishment of an aesthetic space in which phenomenal and literary utterance commingle is seen to be a central aspect of Walcott's poetic mandate and an indispensable act in the cultural development of the West Indies. Bitterly ironic and self-effacing, this passage is still completely dependant on the postulated intelligibility of "dew-lapped lizard discourses," even as it alludes to the *Gospel of St. John* and follows a thematic template very similar to Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*.

In *Omeros*, Caribbean literature's most expansive expression of these language-building strategies, it is clear that in so far as there is a coherent command and control structure in the work, a set of authorial instructions which guide the poem's far-flung inquiries, then that set of instructions pertains to the attempt to access a discourse from which most of the St. Lucian characters have been barred, though they nonetheless sense its presence. This is made clear by three facts: the epic question is asked by a lizard; the secret of Philoctete's cure is articulated by a waterfall; Ma Kilman unearths this secret by interpreting the dialogue of ants. Much of the exchange value of the narrative is based on the depiction of a series of naturalistic codes, the metaphoric idiom these codes

generate, and their effect on those who perceive the discourse but are unable to participate in it. The articulation of some particular truth is not required of the poet, but rather the identification of a question, or the ability to discern a semantic void in which the animist discourse seems able to operate. In figurative terms, it is enough to recognize that the lizard is asking a question; one need not necessarily understand it, nor be able to provide an answer. Apparently unstructured perceptions, the sounds of nature, are recognized as articulate, though indecipherable, and this in itself is an epiphany. Such a sensibility may be interpreted as an extension, albeit rather surrealistic, of the fundamental principles of nation language, at least as that term has been applied in the post-colonial West Indies:

The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. (Brathwaite 17)

In his inferential treatment of nation language, Walcott tends not to frame the subject in terms of the standard oral culture / written culture debate, but sees both these as components of an inclusive Caribbean discourse — a uniquely Caribbean discourse:

England seemed to him merely the place of his birth.
How odd to prefer, over its pastoral sites —
reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth —

these loud-mouthed forests on their illiterate heights,
these springs speaking a dialect that cooled his mind
more than pastures with castles! (*Omeros* 10.3.13-18)

The naturalistic dialogue of the old world has long since fallen silent; unlike the loquacious St. Lucian countryside, the English landscape seems to have little left to say.

This concept receives its most satisfying treatment in “Cul de Sac Valley” as the difficulties of finding a language capable of existing together with the babbling Caribbean landscape are explored through an extended carpentry metaphor. If the poet’s “craft is blest,” he might enact “the fragrant creole” of his community’s

"native grain" (*The Arkansas Testament* 9). No easy feat under any circumstances, the task is impossible using the King's English:

like muttering shale,
 exhaling trees refresh
 memory with their smell:
 bois canot, bois campêche,
 hissing: What you wish
 from us will never be, your word is English,
 is a different tree.

(*The Arkansas Testament* 10)

English, at least as passed down by Trollope and Froude, is clearly not up to the task, but this is not to say that a workable idiom could not be developed. The *bois canot* are not, at the very least, denying the importance of the attempt to develop such an idiom. In fact, the poet's shortcomings are hardly universal in the society. As the poem goes on to point out, some seem to have mastered the requisite language, though they are unable to transcribe it. Perhaps they are simply unconcerned with such arcane matters:

In the rivulet's gravel
 light gutturals begin,
 in the valley, a mongrel,
 a black vowel barking,
 sends up fading ovals;
 by a red bridge,
 menders with shovels
 scrape bubbling pitch,
 every grating squeak
 reaching this height
 a tongue they speak
 in, but cannot write.

(*The Arkansas Testament* 10)

So even if this discourse cannot be reasoned into existence, and though the poet may never have more than partial access to it, evidence of its presence seems a common thing in St. Lucia, at least as St. Lucia exists in Walcott's poetry.

The importance of the knowledge to which such access might make the poet privy, and its value to the project of artistic nation-building in which so many Caribbean writers are engaged, can

scarcely be overstated. Walcott concludes “The Sea is History” with an epic parade of august creatures and the following insight:

and then in the dark ears of ferns
and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo
of History, really beginning.

(*Poems* 367, lines 76-80)

The notion that a poetic engagement of the animist discourse spells the destruction of Eurocentric conceptions of history, and thus constitutes a moment of Adamic possibility, is an attractive one for writers seeking to establish a coherent and recognizable cultural *oeuvre* in the midst of the homogenizing pressures of international literary market forces. The very littleness of the islands, their disbarment from this global voice, frees writers to pursue geographically specific, culturally constituting particularities which have escaped the notice, and thus the totalizing sensibilities, of super-empowered nations.

Unless nothing has escaped notice. Despite Walcott and Brathwaite's claims to the contrary, there may be no uninscribed places. Since “nature” and “Caribbean” are terms constituted for us in language, Walcott's attempt to develop a prosodic / figurative idiom capable of Adamicly unreading such terms “must inevitably be thwarted by the fact that [he is] always in a world whose contours have been supplied prior to his entry” (Freeman 80). All that Walcott can conceivably do is “seize upon what is and, precisely through attempting to remake the old, established idiom, succeed in creating something — or someone — new and original” (Freeman 80). This is a singularly anti-Adamic vision of originality in which every word of every text is implicated in empire. Walcott can disclose nothing of the animist discourse and must remain content with re/examining the form such a discourse has been given in the textuality of empire. The notion that the agency of a coherent, though all but indecipherable animist discourse, partially accounts for the form of Caribbean culture could be dismissed as the romantic musings of an organicist two hundred years out of date. The claim that the very attempt to engage this discourse, far from being futile, is itself culturally constituting, and that the particular

features of the attempt are socially definitive, may seem to be whimsical chicanery, diverting attention from Walcott's inability to escape / confront / confound the idiom of empire. Seeing in the islands themselves a space possessed of an Adamic discourse, a series of unscribed utterances to which poetry can address itself, and in the act of addressing gain access to, may be dismissed as absolute naïveté, "a childlike optimism . . . that the artist under these circumstances is completely unfettered by tradition, and is about to begin in an experiment as new and novel as artistic creation must have been at the dawn of creation" (Khan 157).

Still, many readers have noticed an ahistorical fluency in Walcott's poetry, though this has proven difficult to theoretically position:

For Walcott a vision of history rooted in elation encompasses not the ethnic order and movement of a particular time and place but the recreated vision of an Adamic man, beginning afresh to name his landscape and his world, not with the naive innocence of a noble savage but with the memory and experience of an Adam with a past.

(Wilson-Tagoe 52)

This assessment rings true, but the phrase "Adam with a past," much like the phrase "prediction and memory" used so often in *Omeros*, is so thoroughly equivocal, embodying so fundamental a paradox as to seem all but unaccountable for within a rigorous theoretical framework. But perhaps the very littleness of Caribbean nations allows them to consider more easily what the sprawling self-confidence of larger nations obscure. The feeling of intellectual omnipotence engendered by the belief that we language the world is, in the Caribbean, tempered by consideration of how we have been languaged *by* the world, that is, how we "reflect the celestial patterns that have stimulated and constrained our environment" (Barrow 115), an environment with which all "human social life and human societies . . . are in continuous interaction" (Baker 9):

Days and nights, seasons and tides, cycles of fertility, rest and activity: all are reflections of the rhythms imposed on us by celestial motions . . . [T]he inexorable motions of the heavens and the earth have cast their shadows upon our bodies, our actions, and our superstitions about the meaning of the world. (Barrow 115)

The manner in which nature has written us is at least as important as the manner in which we have written nature. Micro-nation

writers are forced to interrogate this unremitting dialectic if they are to maintain the slightest shred of fidelity to their geographic / sociological surroundings, though cogent awareness of "the rhythms imposed on us" may be difficult if not impossible to attain:

as the codes of nature are neither fixed nor limited, nor even intelligible, the culture of the Peoples of the Sea expresses the desire to sublimate social violence through referring itself to a space that can only be intuited through the poetic. (Benítez-Rojo 17)

Process is all important. Caribbean artists need not decode the operation of nature, but they must develop processes which minimize the disruptive influence of their own discursive activities on the animist discourse of the islands. To proceed without intuitively accounting for the destructive repercussions of their own voice on the voice of the islands is to mimic imperial practice and squander the opportunity the islands' littleness affords. Works so composed could be no more Caribbean than *Vanity Fair*, imposing authority on that which demands intuition.

Walcott's belief that a naturalistic discourse operates in the space between St. Lucian perception and European language and his attempts to develop a poetic method that inflicts no violence on this discourse conspire to expose the frailty of conventional notions of history and originality. For instance, the curious position that *Omeros* occupies with reference to its epic primogenitors, particularly in its insistence on process rather than *telos*, embodies Walcott's belief that Caribbean poetry must issue from the attempt to produce a uniquely Caribbean idiom that subsume both nature and history in an inferential manner:

Poetry, which is perfection's sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of rain or dew on the forehead. There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and self-discovery. Tonally the individual voice is a dialect; it shapes its own accent, its own vocabulary and melody in defiance of an imperial concept of language, the language of *Ozymandias*. . . . The dialects of my archipelago seem as fresh to me as those raindrops on the statue's forehead, not the sweat made from the classic exertion of frowning marble, but the condensations of a refreshing element, rain and salt. (Walcott, *The Antilles* 9-10)

This archaeological aspect of poetry that uncovers the language's "natural and marmoreal" axes as it commingles past and present produces "its own vocabulary" which renders "the diction of institutions" (*Antilles* 11) irrelevant in a West Indian context that constantly points up the gaping absences in institutional modes of expression and draws attention to the elemental dialect of the islands. Sheltered by their littleness, the islands have preserved this dialect. Protected in the calm of their cultural insularity, island artists are able to discern the existence of this dialect. Schooled by centuries of immobility, island culture proceeds with deference to this dialect, aware that this very deference is itself culturally constituting. Safe in the shadows, Caribbean artists nurture "the intuitive inner voice of the mask" (Harris 26), and in so doing bring a unique mode of expression to flower. That this mode of expression may never establish itself in an international literary marketplace is beside the point and perhaps to be desired. Littleness is its own reward.

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