UNIT 2 DEREK WALCOTT - I

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are (a) to provide information about Derek Walcott’s life and work as a poet, painter, dramatist and essayist, (b) to look at a representative selection of his poetry till 1980. The major themes and concerns of Walcott’s poetry will be indicated through a detailed analysis of each of the poems included in this unit. You can begin by reading the poem and looking up the difficult words in the glossary accompanying it. Then read the poem along with its analysis. Finally think about how the poems reflect various aspects of Caribbean culture, what stance the poet has towards it, and how it is similar to or different from the poets discussed in the previous unit.

2.1 ST. LUCIA
Walcott was born in 1930 on the island of St. Lucia which is a member of the Eastern Caribbean Association formed after the collapse of the West Indian Federation in 1962. The island is on the Windward side of the Caribbean basin along with Grenada, Martinique, St. Vincent, Grenadines and Dominica. In the 1500s and 1600s Britain and France fought for control over these islands. The culture of St. Lucia reflects the duality of the colonial powers that contended for it for over 160 years. In 1804 the English acquired control but the French left their mark on the language and customs of the island which had a population of mainly Africans or part-Africans. The French influence is also visible in Roman Catholicism which is still the principal religion of the island. Most of the St. Lucian population is bilingual or even trilingual but more comfortable in French creole than in any other language. Walcott is of African and English parentage and has called his boyhood “schizophrenic.” In an interview with Robert Hamner he said, “I have not only a dual racial personality but a dual linguistic personality. My real language, and tonally my basic language, is patois.” Walcott’s poetry reveals the interpenetration of languages: French creole, English creole, English and even European languages like Latin. As has been observed by commentators on Walcott’s language, there are small examples of “West Indian vocabulary” placed in “a Standard English setting.” Walcott has written about his “illegitimacy” in the West Indian tradition in his essay “What the Twilight Says: An Overture” (“WTS”). Here he calls himself “this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian” (10). His poetry reflects this hybridity both at the level of language as well as identity. The title of his poem on St. Lucia is “Sainte Lucie,” the creolization indicating the exploration of language thematized in it. Similarly one of his early poems “A Far Cry from Africa” expresses this theme of an hybrid identity:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this African and the English tongue I love?

(Collected Poems, hereafter CP, 18)

When I discuss Walcott’s poetry I will point out further elaborations on the theme of hybridity, a much discussed concept in post-colonial theory. One of these is the feeling of dis-location experienced by the individual who feels a sense of rootlessness in the culture of his/her origin. Walcott was born in St. Lucia, received “a sound colonial education” there, studied and worked in Jamaica and Trinidad for some time, but since the 1970s he has been teaching in the United States. However, the Caribbean and St. Lucia in particular continues to impress on his creative imagination. In his epic poem, Omeros (1990), modelled on Homer’s Odyssey, he presents St. Lucia as “the Helen of the West Indies” because thirteen battles were fought for its control by rival colonial powers. And yet the poet feels a sense of dissociation from his island when he returns there. This is expressed in “The Light of the World” in which he represents St. Lucia by means of female figures, but as he passes from the town to the hotel he says it is full of “transients” like himself. St. Lucia’s history, language and culture are constituents of the structure of feeling which informs Derek Walcott’s multigeneric creativity. It is to the various aspects of this that I will now draw your attention.

2.2 DEREK WALCOTT

2.2.1 Poet

When Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 the Swedish Academy made a special mention of his epic poem Omeros. Regarded as his magnum opus this poem transposes Homeric characters to a St. Lucian setting to make the epic reflect Caribbean reality. Walcott has never been reticent about
acknowledging that the major influences on his poetic career have been European and American. Among the poets he most enjoys reading are Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Edward Thomas. He admits to have written poems in the manner of Eliot and Auden at the beginning of his poetic career. That his acknowledgement of influence might lead to the charge of imitation or non-originality is a danger Walcott is well aware of. His self-confidence in such acknowledgements stems from what he calls a "tribal accent." He believes that people in many of the erstwhile colonies who "grow up speaking the English language" experience no "alienation" from it and hence their claim that the language belongs to them is justified. Imitation arises only when these speakers forget their "tribal accent" and try to speak in imitation of the accent of the original tongue. To this end he has never thought of himself as an English writer but has let native rhythms permeate his work so that it is not one particular writer which has influenced him but rather "Literature" in general (Brown and Johnson, 176-77). Walcott's early poetry is full of echoes from canonical texts of European literature. This is especially evident in collections like In A Green Night (1962) where the title poem refers to Marvell, The Castaway and Other Poems (1965) and The Gulf (1970). In his later poetry the work of New World poets like St. John Perse from Guadeloupe, Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Pablo Neruda from Chile is often acknowledged as providing poetic models. Walcott's friendship with contemporary poets like Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes has also played a part in his poetic development. Through Brodsky he links himself to the Russian poet Mandelstam and through Lowell to the idea of America evinced in his later poetry.

I point out all these varied influences to counter Walcott's appropriation as an English poet in recent critical scholarship on the one hand and his dismissal on grounds of unoriginality on the other. Like T.S. Eliot's idea of tradition and the individual talent, Walcott's formulations about a poetic tradition emphasise its continuity: "The new poet enters a flux and withdraws, as the weaver continues the pattern, hand to hand and mouth to mouth, as the rock-pile convict passes the sledge" ("The Muse of History," henceforth "MH"). This last comparison between the poet and the convict links the exercise of the poetic craft to the idea of a continuity of enforced labour. The way Walcott perceives poetry it becomes a laborious exercise with the poet being chained to his craft much like a convict. Given the history of slavery and enforced labour in the Caribbean this seems to me a particularly apt metaphor for describing his postcolonial poetics.

2.2.2 Painter

Walcott's artistic development has been strongly imprinted by his father's work as a painter. Although Warwick Walcott died when Walcott was an infant, he left behind water colour paintings which, in the author's own words, "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." For a long time Walcott veered between painting and poetry. He has continued painting over the years and has had important relationships with the painters Harry Simmons and Dunstan St. Omer, a childhood friend, to whom some of his poems are dedicated. In Chapter 9 of Another Life Walcott speaks of abandoning his painterly ambitions for poetry:

I hoped that both disciplines might
by painful accretion cohere
and finally ignite,
but I lived in a different gift,
its element metaphor.

Nevertheless, as Rei Terada has observed, his poetry "often considers the arts' interrelations" and his poems "quietly merge the verbal with the visual" (119). The evanescence of both painting and poetry is a theme often expressed in his work. It is from his interest in the visual arts that the landscape descriptions in his poetry draw
their concreteness and detail. Visual extravagance in Caribbean art and literature is something he defends with reference to Greek art. According to him the Greek sculptures were painted very brightly unlike the bleached out quality they're now associated with: "All the purple and gold . . . is very Caribbean, that same vigor and elation of an earlier Greece, not a later Greece . . ." (Brown and Johnson 183). With such correspondences in mind it is easy to see why Walcott chose Homer's Greek epic as the model for his Caribbean epic *Omeros*.

### 2.2.3 Dramatist

In "What The Twilight Says: An Overture," the essay which forms the introduction to a selection of Walcott's early plays, he describes "two pale children" watching the drama being enacted on the streets from an upstairs window. Reading this account about how these children created their "little theatre" of men made from twigs it is easy to conceive how Derek and his twin brother Roderick Walcott grew up to be the most significant Caribbean playwrights of this century. In 1950 Walcott along with Maurice Mason founded the Arts Guild of St. Lucia. When he left the island to take up a scholarship at the University of West Indies the leadership of the Guild was taken over by Roderick. It was in Trinidad that Walcott's plays *The Sea at Dauphin* and *Henri Christophe* were first staged in the 1950s. In 1958 the highpoint of the celebrations to herald the inauguration of the West Indies Federation was an open air production of the epic drama written by Walcott-titled *Drums and Colours*. In 1959 Walcott formed the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, one of the most influential groups working in theatre at that time. In his essays and interviews Walcott has described his twenty year struggle to form a professional theatre company and the sense of failure which he felt at its break up. The note of despondency is summed up succinctly in the statement: "In these new nations art is a luxury, and the theatre the most superfluous of amenities" ("WTS" 7).

Over the years many of Walcott's plays have drawn upon folklore for source material. In the fifties and sixties the plays *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* and *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* drew upon folk tales and legends. Versions of European classics include *The Joker of Seville* and an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Walcott is an extremely prolific playwright whose plays have been performed all over the world. For many of his plays he draws upon the traditions of popular culture in the Caribbean specially the Carnival which has been called theatre on the streets. Coming from a region of the world where the theatre is all around "in the streets at lampfall in the kitchen doorway," it is no wonder that the region's most famous poet should also be its best known playwright.

### 2.3 CRUSOE'S JOURNAL

#### 2.3.1 Literary Source/Post-colonial Resource

The title of this poem points at its literary source, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* published in 1791. The poem reworks the associations this literary character conjures with the aim of abrogating it for specifically voicing post-colonial concerns. You would remember that Defoe's novel is about a man shipwrecked on an island who, being the only survivor, fends for himself making the best use of what he can salvage from the wreck and of the resources available on the island. During the course of his long stay on the island he rescues a savage from cannibals whom he later names Friday. Friday becomes Crusoe's companion and servant on the island. I hope this outline has refreshed your memory of the text and you can see how the narrative can be read as being about colonisation. Crusoe is the discoverer and coloniser of the island, if only an unwilling one, since it is his misfortune to be stranded there. He longs for human company but in Friday he finds a savage whom he must civilize by teaching him the English language and Christian morality. The hierarchical relation between the two is reinforced by Friday calling Crusoe "Master."
Can you think of any other canonical English work which can also be interpreted in this manner? Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* immediately comes to my mind. In the play Prospero, the deposed duke of Milan cast adrift on a boat with his daughter Miranda, lands on a lonely island inhabited by the witch Sycorax who has kept spirits imprisoned. The witch's son Caliban is the sole inhabitant of the island when Prospero lands on it. With the aid of his magic Prospero frees the spirits and keeps Caliban in his service having taught him his language so that he can obey orders. Prospero's control over the island and its original inhabitants like Ariel and Caliban can be seen as another narrative of colonisation.

The similarity between these two examples of canonical texts which can be read in this way should be clear to you. Pay special attention to the fact that both Crusoe and Prospero teach their language to the savages they control.

Both *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest* have been subject to many such readings. In 1960 George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* dismantled the hierarchy of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban to see Caliban as a West Indian whose human status is negated by the European who denied him his inheritance. In 1969 Aime Cesaire reworked the play in an African context rewriting it in French (Ashcroft *et al* 189). Walcott's poetic rendition of the figure of Crusoe in this and other poems is one of the earliest re-readings of Defoe's classic text. It is useful to remember that Defoe based his story on the experiences of Alexander Selkirk. Selkirk was a member of a privateering expedition. Having quarrelled with his captain he asked to be put ashore on the island of Juan Fernandez in 1704. He remained on the island till 1709 when he was rescued by a ship. So the context of the original work is not unlinked to the mercenary motives of colonial enterprise. There have been other interpretations of Defoe's novel in recent times. In 1986 the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee published *Foe*, a fictional re-interpretation in which the narrator is a white, female castaway who tells her story to “Robinson Crusoe.” It is later that the reader comes to know that the narrator is addressing her story to “Daniel Foe” so that he can write about it. The latter part of the novel is in the form of her journal. Coetzee chooses to write the novel from the point of a woman indicating the masculinist ethos of an adventure novel like Defoe's. Walcott's agenda in this poem seems to be to posit Crusoe as a New World Adam from whose journals “the language of a race” took its present form. The language is of course English but adapted to the surroundings Crusoe finds himself in. Through his journals it also becomes the language of those who succeed him. The post-colonial poetics is evident in Friday’s claim to what was initially an imposed language.

### 2.3.2 The Text

**Crusoe's Journal**

*I looked now upon the world as a thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no expectation from, and, indeed, no desires about. In a word, I had nothing indeed to do with it, nor was ever like to have; so I thought it looked as we may perhaps look upon it hereafter, viz., as a place I had lived in but was come out of it; and well might I say, as Father Abraham to Dives, "Between me and thee is a great gulf fixed."

—ROBINSON CRUSOE

Once we have driven past Mundo Nuevo trace safely to this beach house perched between ocean and green, churning forest the intellect appraises objects surely, even the bare necessities of style are turned to use,
like those plain iron tools he salvages
from shipwreck, hewing a prose
as odorous as raw wood to the adze;
out of such timbers
came our first book, our profane Genesis
whose Adam speaks that prose
which, blessing some sea-rock, startles itself
with poetry's surprise,
in a green world, one without metaphors;
like Christofer he bears
in speech mnemonic as a missionary's
the Word to savages,
its shape an earthen, water-bearing vessel's
whose sprinkling alters us
into good Fridays who recite His praise,
parroting our master's
style and voice, we make his language ours,
converted cannibals
we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ.

All shapes, all objects multiplied from his,
our ocean's Proteus;
in childhood, his derelict's old age
was like a god's. (Now pass
in memory, in serene parenthesis,
the cliff-deep leeward coast
of my own island filing past the noise
of stuttering canvas,
some noon-struck village, Choiseul, Canaries,
crouched crocodile canoes,
a savage settlement from Henty's novels,
Marryat or R.L.S.,
with one boy signalling at the sea's edge,
though what he cried is lost.)

So time, that makes us objects, multiplies
our natural loneliness.

For the hermetic skill, that from earth's clays
shapes something without use,
and, separate from itself, lives somewhere else,
sharing with every beach
a longing for those gulls that cloud the cays
with raw, mimetic cries,
ever surrenders wholly, for it knows
it needs another's praise
like hoar, half-cracked Ben Gunn, until it cries
at last, "O happy desert!"
and learns again the self-creating peace
of islands. So from this house
that faces nothing but the sea, his journals
assume a household use;
we learn to shape from them, where nothing was
the language of a race,
and since the intellect demands its mask
that sun-cracked, bearded face
provides us with the wish to dramatize
ourselves at nature's cost,
to attempt a beard, to squint through the sea-haze,
posing as naturalists,
drunks, castaways, beachcombers, all of us
Caribbean Poetry

yearn for those fantasies
of innocence, for our faith's arrested phase
when the clear voice
startled itself saying "water, heaven, Ch ist,"
hoarding such heresies as
God's loneliness moves in His smallest creatures.

Glossary

hewing: to chop or cut
odorous: diffusing fragrance
adze: tool for cutting away the surface of wood
Genesis: first book of the Old Testament with an account of the Creation
Christofer: Christopher Columbus
mnemonic: designed to aid the memory
Proteus: a minor sea-god in Homer's Odyssey who has the power to assume different shapes
derelict: person abandoned by society
leeward: towards the sheltered side
canoe: slender wooden boat with pointed or open ends
Henty: George Alfred Henty (1832-1902), a war correspondent most famous as the author of stories for boys mainly based on military history. The best remembered of these are Out in the Pampas (1868), The Young Buglers (1880), Under Drake's Flag (1883) and With Clive in India (1889).
Marryat: Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848), a naval captain, wrote several novels of sea life among them Midshipman Easy (1836), most famous for his children's books especially The Settlers in Canada (1844) and Children of the New Forest (1847).
R.L.S.: Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94). His first full length novel was Treasure Island (1883) followed by The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886). Also remembered for the popular Scottish romance Kidnapped (1886).
hermetic: alchemical
cay: insular bank or reef of coral, sand etc.
Ben Gunn: a character in Stevenson's Treasure Island, a marooned pirate who helps Jim and Squire Trelawney secure the treasure
beachcomber: white man in the Pacific islands who lives by collecting goods thrown over-board from ships
heresy: opinion contrary to the doctrine of the Christian Church

2.3.3 Analysis

The poem begins with an epigraph from Robinson Crusoe in which Crusoe articulates his feeling of alienation from the world. He experiences a disconnection
from it which he says might be comparable to what one experiences "hereafter," after
death when one looks upon the transient world. It is the same feeling which is
expressed by the poet in the first few lines. Keep in mind that the poem is from
Walcott's 1965 collection *The Castaway and Other Poems*. A comment made by
Walcott explaining how he came to write the title poem of this collection is of
relevance to "Crusoe's Journal" as well. He says he wrote "The Castaway" at a
beach house in Trinidad where the "beaches ... are generally, very empty - just you,
the sea and the vegetation around you." At that beach house, he conceived "an image
of the West Indian artist as someone who was in a shipwrecked position" (Hirsch qtd.
in Terada 158). This poem begins by mentioning a beach house located between the
ocean and the forest. The image of the artist as situated between worlds is continued
when the Crusoe-artist is shown as fashioning "a prose as odorous as raw wood.
The craft of the carpenter and artist are brought together in the use of the word
"timber," which literally means wood but has the same pronunciation as 'timbre,'
denoting the characteristic quality of sounds. The word "green" repeated twice in the
first stanza indicates both the uncorrupted Edenic vitality of the island where Crusoe
was shipwrecked and also the fresh, uncluttered language he uses, "one without
metaphors." Three figures are brought together in this stanza: the literary (Robinson
Crusoe), the Biblical/mythological (Adam) and the historical (Christopher
Columbus). Linking them is their use of language. Crusoe is the New World Adam
who, like the Biblical Adam, names his surroundings. He is also like "Christofer"
(Walcott uses the creolized version of his name) inasmuch as he attempts to
Christianize his servant Friday, the "converted cannibal." The Biblical echoes in the
last line of the stanza are skillfully woven in: "Word" is the word of God as well as
language in general; the savage sprinkled with water is baptized but sprinkling with a
few drops of water can also mean granting a limited knowledge of the language;
"good Fridays" indicates obedient servants but it is also the Friday before Easter
commemorating the crucifixion; and finally towards the end Christianity is presented
as a cannibalistic religion as the phrase "eat the flesh" indicates. The varied aspects
of Crusoe's personality - he is at once a castaway, a discoverer, a coloniser, a linguist
and a missionary - delineated by the poet in the previous stanza make him Protean. It
is this ability to assume various shapes, almost like a god, which is so fascinating to
the poet in his childhood. A child's fascination with literary characters and situations
is concretised in the middle of the poem by mentioning the names of famous
nineteenth century writers of adventure tales for children. Henty, Marryat and
Stevenson all wrote works which have become classics of children's literature. That
the poet is remembering the incidents read in his childhood is stylistically indicated
through the use of parentheses. The sense of awe and wonder at "savage
settlements" and "crouched crocodile canoes" is evident in the obvious alliteration,
that it is also bracketed off makes it a long forgotten sensation. The boy standing at
the edge of the sea is a mental image of childhood, the words "what he cried is lost"
indicate that it is an incomplete image. It is a Wordsworthian reminiscence especially
in terms of the contrast set up between the "stuttering" past and the "serene" present.
And this serenity is not an unmixed blessing for since his boyhood days there has
been a multiplication of the poet's loneliness. Notice once more how the poetic
persona and his Crusoe mask came together in the phrase "natural loneliness" which
indicates that alienation is both inherent as well as circumstantial, as in the case of
Crusoe when nature, in a sense, conspired to his being the lone survivor of a
shipwreck.

This conjunction is continued in the last stanza of the poem where the poet's craft of
shaping poetry from the clay of language is called "hermetic." The word carries
associations of magic as well as insularity. The image of shaping vessels from clay is
carried over from the first stanza where "earthen, water-bearing vessel[s]" are
mentioned. Thinking back on *Robinson Crusoe* I am reminded of the incident in it
when Crusoe tries to make vessels from clay, first unsuccessfully and then later, by
accident, successfully. Again relating the poetic craft to that of the humble potter the
poet labels it as "something without use." In him the desire for isolation contends
with an opposing need for recognition, "another's praise." Ben Gunn, the pirate who
was deserted by his crew in Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, is an apt figure for
concretising these paradoxical desires. The dangers of isolation are pointed out through the phrase “half-cracked.” While solitude and “peace” is essential for creativity, too much of it can lead to mental imbalance. The appropriation of Crusoe’s language by Friday, the savage, leads to the shaping of the “language of a race.” Crusoe’s journal, the repository of the script, is the main source of the language the colonised take over and make their own. It is also suggested that Crusoe is just a personification of man’s desire for self-dramatization, a boyhood or adolescent fantasy untenable in the real world. In contrast to the questioning faith of childhood, adult life is marked with alienation so that it (alienation) is seen as a part of all God’s creations. The transference of a personal experience to all of God’s creatures is a “heresy” the poetic persona is acutely conscious of.

2.3.4 Mimicry

Now that I have analysed the poem I want you to notice its structure and to make interrelations between its form and content. Notice that each of the three stanzas consists of long lines alternating with short lines. Each stanza comprises one long sentence with clauses and the end of the sentence also marks the end of the stanza. The first and last stanzas posit the person’s identification with both Crusoe and Friday, whereas the second consists of boyhood reminiscences. Walcott’s poetics of affiliation make him identify the poetic persona with both the coloniser and the colonised, Crusoe and Friday. This probably explains the alternation of long and short lines, Friday “learns to shape” the language so that presumably the structure of the poem visually enacts this learning process indicated by the shorter lines. But do not forget that the shorter lines are enclosed within the longer sentence comprising the stanza, suggesting, in my view, that if Friday learns from Crusoe, the latter’s language too is inflected with the former’s. The poet envies the “raw, mimetic cries” of the gulls on the beach, the word “mimetic” should alert you to the fact that from one perspective Friday’s language of the race, which is also the poet’s, can be dismissed as colonial mimicry. Walcott counters this idea in his essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” by writing: “When language itself is condemned as mimicry, then the condition is hopeless and men are no more than jackdaws, parrots, myna birds, apes” (7). Go back to the lines in which the poet hears the gulls and you will notice that there is a longing for mimesis expressed there. As Terada has pointed out mimicry is a survival and evolutionary technique and hence has anthropologically positive connotations (23). Walcott’s most thorough debunking of the notions of originality and mimicry occurs in his play Pantomime (1978) where the black servant Jackson Phillip and his white master Harry Trewé each play the role of both Friday and Crusoe. By underscoring the effects of the written word through the mention of adventure novels by Henty, Marryat, Stevenson and Crusoe’s journal, Walcott reinterprets the binary opposition between speech/writing, original/mimesis. Friday and the poet fashion their language from the written word, hence if they can be accused of mimicry it is not of the original but of something which is itself a representation or mimesis.

2.4 NAMES

2.4.1 A New World and a New Language

The arbitrariness of language in a New World setting is a commonplace in religious, literary and theoretical discourse. I use the phrase “New World” not only in the specific sense of the American continent, as I have done so far, but also to refer to the newly created world mentioned in Genesis and its literary elucidation in Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667). Genesis begins with an account of the Creation of the world and man. Chapter 2 v.19 describes how God leaves it to Adam to name the birds and the beasts: “and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” You can see for yourself that no reason is given for assigning a particular name to a particular creature, the whimsicality of Adam seems to underlie the
important task of nomenclature which can be said to be the first step towards the development of language. Adam's first words are nouns but the Genesis does not specify whether these bear resemblance to the creatures or objects they denote. Milton gives an account of Creation as narrated to Adam by the angel Raphael in Book VII of Paradise Lost. Raphael lists the beasts, birds and insects created by God and then tells Adam: "thou the Natures know'st, and gav'st them Names." The link between nomenclature and the object to be named is clearly not arbitrary here, the nouns have a basis in the "Natures" or attributes of the creatures. Observe how a new world necessitates the invention of a new language but that the connection between the two parts of a linguistic sign - the 'signifier' (a spoken or written mark) and the 'signified' (what is thought when the mark is made) - may not be either apparent or present. The problem is intensified when both the world and the language is new as was the case with all those who arrived to the Caribbean under the system of slavery or near-forced labour like the Africans and later the Indians and the Chinese. The Crusoe and Caliban paradigms cannot be rigorously applied here because out of language and world, both figures possess one familiar entity. Crusoe found himself in a new world but had his language to express its reality, Caliban experienced imposition of a new language but his surroundings were familiar to him. As far as Africans being brought to the New World are concerned, both language and surroundings were alien and hence it was inevitable that they could perceive no connection between the signifier and the signified. It is the disorientation resulting from this which Walcott highlights in this poem.

2.4.2 The Text

Names

[for Edward Brathwaite]

I
My race began as the sea began,
with no nouns, and with no horizon,
with pebbles under my tongue,
with a different fix on the stars.

But now my race is here,
in the sad oil of Levantine eyes,
in the flags of the Indian fields.

I began with no memory,
I began with no future,
but I looked for that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon—
for the goldsmith from Benares,
the stonemason from Canton,
as a fishline sinks, the horizon
sinks in the memory.

Have we melted into a mirror,
leaving our souls behind?
The goldsmith from Benares,
the stonemason from Canton,
the bronzemason from Benin.

A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
and my race began like the osprey
with that cry.
that terrible vowel
that I!
Behind us all the sky folded,
as history folds over a fishline,
and the foam foreclosed
with nothing in our hands

but this stick
to trace our names on the sand
which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

II
And when they named these bays
bays,
was it nostalgia or irony?

In the uncombed forest,
in uncultivated grass
where was there elegance
except in their mockery?

Where were the courts of Castille?
Versailles' colonnades
supplanted by cabbage palms
with Corinthian crests,
belittling diminutives,
then, little Versailles
meant plans for a pigsty,
names for the sour apples
and green grapes
of their exile.

Their memory turned acid
but the names held;
Valencia glows
with the lanterns of oranges,
Mayaro's
charred candelabra of cocoa.
Being men, they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of every thing to be a noun.
The African acquiesced,
repeated, and changed them.

Listen, my children, say:
moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry,
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends
our natural inflections.

These palms are greater than Versailles,
for no man made them,
their fallen columns greater than Castille,
no man unmade them
except the worm, who has no helmet,
but was always the emperor,
and children, look at these stars
over Valencia's forest!

Not Orion,
not betelgeuse,
tell me, what do they look like?
Answer, you damned little Arabs!
Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.

Glossary

fix: position found by astronomical observations
Levantine: inhabitant of Levant, countries belonging to the Eastern part of Mediterranean like Morocco
Benares: a holy city on the banks of the Ganges in India
Canton: a province in China
Benin: a small West African country
sea-eagle: a kind of fishing eagle
osprey: a large bird preying on fish, also called the fishing eagle or sea-hawk
bay: a bark or howl; part of sea filling a wide mouthed opening of land; kind of wreath worn by conquerors or poets. All three meanings applicable in this context.
Castille: Spain
Versailles: a city in France
colonnades: series of columns
Corinthian: Greek style of architecture having a bell shaped capital with rows of leaves
cabbage palms: a lofty palm with a cylindrical trunk and a large crown of fronds
Valencia: a province of Spain
candelabra: branched candlestick or lampstand
acquiesced: agreed

2.4.3 Analysis

The lack of both a language and a point of cultural origin due to the enslavement of the African people are seen by the poet as negating the linear view of history. In this sense the sea, a seemingly endless expanse of water with no beginning or end in sight, is an apt metaphor for the flux of the non-linearity of history. Behind this idea is Heraclitus's comparison of the flux of time to the flowing of a river. The comparison with the sea is extended and developed in the first few lines of the poem specially with the idea of "pebbles under...[the] tongue" and "a different fix on stars." The rocks under the surface of an apparently transparent sea can be compared to coercion underlying the use of colonial languages by the slaves. The nature of perceived reality also suffers an enforced change much like the alteration of the position of the stars depending upon the point from which they are observed. A
drastic alteration effected in both language and reality arose out of the journey across
the Middle Passage and culminated in the arrival “here,” the Caribbean. The sadness
in the eyes of those brought from Morocco or those who came from India attests to
the sense of deprivation felt by them. The word “horizon,” reiterated continuously
in the first part of the poem is the object of search. If taken to mean the point of cultural
or historical beginning then the “mind halved by a horizon” would be that of a
schizophrenic, one marked by disconnection between thought, feelings and actions.
As the goldsmith from Benares or stone-cutter from Canton become accustomed to
the colonial servitude, which demands from them not their traditional skills but those
of the unskilled labourer, the schizoid tendencies disappear, “the horizon sinks in the
memory.” When men are looked upon as mere labour it is a degradation of their
humanity for they are important only for their physical attributes or mirror image, the
soul ceases to be of any consequence. The traditional crafts they were engaged in
(that of the goldsmith, stonecutter and bronzesmith) required a spiritual as well as
physical effort, but only the latter is demanded of them in the New World. The
language corresponding to such a situation can only be one of anguish, a scream or a
cry. The nature-culture opposition is emphasised and resolved in the beginning of
language with the cry of a bird. Language does not refer to the reality outside, its
only referent is the individual, “that I,” whose anguish it reflects. Correspondences
between the sea and history which Walcott explicates movingly in a later poem “The
Sea is History” are anticipated in the concluding lines of the first section of “Names.”
Dispossession leaves the poet’s race with “nothing in . . . [their] hands,” the historical
erasure of their suffering is here emblematised as the sea erasing the names on the
sand. This image has its literary antecedents in Spenser’s Amoretti: “I wrote her
name upon the strand,” where it is used to depict the evanescence of love and beauty.
The difference in the context of the usage serves to highlight the irony inherent in its
use.

After having outlined the historical imperatives Walcott turns to linguistic ones. The
second part of the poem begins with a questioning of the interrelationship between
the signifier and the signified in the sign “bays,” a word which has multiple
meanings. The emotion underlying this nomenclature could be “nostalgia” for power
and glory which the colonisers tried to re-enact in the New World, if the word is
taken to mean the wreath of bay leaves worn by conquerors. But two other meanings
of the word - a bark or howl and a part of the sea filling in an opening in the land-
could also have been implied in an ironical usage. The howl of the slave and the roar
of the sea would testify to the glory of the colonisers at the same time as it would be
an ironic reminder to the slaves of their misery. The elegance invested in the
language is, according to the poet, not reflective of the surroundings and hence
constitutes “mockery.” Examples of this mockery include speaking of the New
World in terms borrowed from the Old World which carry the grandeur associated
with its civilizational accomplishments like art and architecture. Thus the cabbage
palms are compared to Versailles’ colonnades, for nature provides the architecture of
this world. The fronds on the palms are equated with rows of acanthus leaves on
corinthian pillars. When the name of a city like Versailles is applied to a pigsty the
poet thinks that it is the exiles’ revenge for being forced to leave Europe. Walcott is
here delineating the factors governing the Europeans’ use of language just as he had
in the previous section discussed the historical conditions which led to its imposition
on others. Most of the white population in the Caribbean is descended from convicts
for whom the region was at once a haven as well as exile. Probably this is the reason
for their dissatisfaction which the poet indicates by the phrases “sour apples” and
“green grapes.” The other markers of the world they have left behind, as reflected in
the varied means of lighting (lanterns and candelabra), are to be found as oranges and
cocoa, much like the colonnades being cabbage palms.

Nouns are the primary markers of identification in the object world and the beginning
of language. That the African transformed this language is indicated in the poem by
means of what is called “internal translation.” The poetic persona in the concluding
section of the poem is that of a school-teacher teaching the children nouns, names of
fruits and trees found in the Caribbean. The teacher gives the creole names and then explains them by their English equivalents. He rejects the received ways of pronunciation when he asks the children to utter the names “with fresh green voices” and “our natural inflections.” In my introduction to Walcott’s poetry at the beginning of this unit I had referred to Walcott’s idea of the “tribal accent,” the teacher is here asking the students to speak the language with their own and not received notions of the tribal accent. The pronunciation is one of the ways in which Africans “changed” the language imposed on them. A direct correlation is established between language and reality, culture and nature. Whereas the Europeans value their linguistic and cultural supremacy, the Caribbean school teacher in the poem overturns the hierarchy which places culture above nature to say that “These palms are greater than Versailles,” “their fallen columns greater than Castile” (emphasis added). The superiority of nature’s handiwork is proved by the “worm,” signifying the destructibility of all objects. Towards the end of the poem he asks the children to describe the stars, forbidding them to use the names given to constellations. The children’s answer that the stars look like “fireflies caught in molasses” is a perfect example of the correspondence between language and nature which the teacher had sought to establish. Molasses is made from sugarcane which along with bananas is one of the principal crops of the Caribbean. The sticky, sweet molasses often attract insects like fireflies. The descriptions draws on the Caribbean reality and hence constitutes a re-naming of the constellations.

2.4.4 Nommo

The poem I have just analysed is divided into two parts. To make further discussion on it comprehensible I will call these parts “historical” and “linguistic.” The cultural critic who has most comprehensively explored the connections between history and language in the Caribbean is Edward Brathwaite to whom Walcott dedicates this poem. In Contradictory Omens (1974) Brathwaite wrote about the repressive conditions making up the history of the Afro-Caribbeans. From within an oppressive system these people “have been able to survive, adapt, recreate . . . and begin to offer to return some of this experience and vision.” Re-naming is one of the modes of adaptation and recreation in which language is made to correspond to perceived reality. Brathwaite has further explicated this concept as that of the nommo which means the word or name, held to contain secret power. As he says, “[the] way of using the word depends very much upon an understanding of the folk tradition out of which it comes” (Roots 241). In this context the folk tradition is the creolization of language and Walcott has foregrounded this by giving, in the first part of the poem, the historical background to linguistic and cultural creolization, a method Brathwaite followed in his pathbreaking The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica (1970).

One interesting feature of the poem is the shift in the person and number of the pronouns used. The poem begins with the use of the first person possessive pronoun “My race” and then moves to the first person singular “I”, then the plural “we,” which is continued in the “our” with which the first section ends. The poet claims both to speak of his race and for it. In the second part the third person plural pronoun “they” is used for the Europeans, towards the end there is a return to the first person form of address. Terada is of the opinion that this echoes the poem’s theme but she does not provide a convincing explanation of this (98). In my opinion the multiplicity of pronouns used attests to the different persona the poet adopts in the poem: a poet (who gives poetic form to African history); a member of the African race; a member of the various Asian communities (Indian, Chinese); a commentator on the linguistic excesses of the Europeans; and finally a school teacher teaching students the correct approach to language. These are all “names” which can be given to a persona who in himself embodies all the different races who have contributed to the linguistic hybridity of the Caribbean. Finally the poem is a tribute to Brathwaite, who through his writings has done the most to have this hybridity recognised as “nation language” and not dismissed as dialect or patois.
Walcott spent his childhood and some part of his adult life in St. Lucia where he received a "sound colonial education" familiarising him with Western culture. This explains the commonly found references to Western art, culture and literature in his work. But that the Caribbean reality is also deeply impressed on his creative imagination is indicated by his view of nature as constituting the history and civilization of these islands. This is briefly touched upon in his poem "Names" but elaborated fully in "The Sea is History":

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea, the sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.  

(CP 364)

Refusing to adopt a stand of "recrimination and despair" or one of "remorse" towards history he prefers "a truly tough aesthetic of the New World [which] neither explains nor forgives history" ("MH" 39). This is apparent in poems like "Crusoe's Journal" where the poet aligns himself both with Crusoe the coloniser and Friday the colonised. Reworking canonical literary characters like Crusoe for a specifically post-colonial agenda on the language politics in the Caribbean is a technique used quite often in Walcott's early poetry. The multilingual heritage of the Caribbean and its multicultural society are reflected in Walcott's poetry not only through the different poetic persons but also in poems like "The Saddhu of couva" and "Nights in the Gardens of Port of Spain." The enforced migrations of people which gave this society its multicultural identity is remembered in "A Far Cry From Africa," and the plantation system which was sustained by it in "Ruins of a Great House." In the latter poem Walcott's stand on history outlined in "The Muse of History" is presented in poetic idiom:

Ablaze with rage I thought,  
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,  
But still the coal of my compassion fought  
That Albion too was once  
A colony like ours . . .  

(CP 20)

While this stand can be read as pacifist and liberal humanist I hope to show in the next unit that this would be a ridiculously simplistic view of Walcott's poetic ideology.

2.6 QUESTIONS

Q1. To what end are literary characters re-worked in post-colonial literature? Discuss with detailed reference to one of Walcott's poems.

Q2. The structure of Walcott's poetry reflects the theme. Elaborate on this statement giving examples from two poems.

Q3. Write a critical account of the relationship between history and language in Walcott's poetry.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material


**Secondary Material**

