A WARBLE OF POSTCOLONIAL VOICES

An Anthology of Short Stories and Poems

Volume II: Poems

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WORLDVIEW
An Imprint of
Book Land Publishing Co.

WORLDVIEW PUBLICATIONS
An Imprint of Book Land Publishing Co.
Delhi : 58 U.B., Bungalow Road, Delhi-110007

Second Revised Edition, 2018

ISBN: 978-93-82267-16-4

Typeset by Illuminati, Delhi-11000 7
Published by Sachin Rastogi for Book Land Publishing Co., Delhi-7 and
Printed at D.K. Fine Art Press (P) Ltd., Delhi.

Derek Walcott

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Biography and Literary Work

Derek Alton Walcott was born in 1930 in the town of Castries on the island of St. Lucia in the British West Indies. An often referred-to biographical detail is that he had two white grandfathers and two black grandmothers, which gives him a dual heritage that is reflected in his literary engagement. Walcott's family were practicing Methodists in a society that was predominantly Catholic and did face some ostracisation because of it. Walcott's first published poem at the age of fourteen had religious themes. Walcott himself affirms: "I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation." (Hamner 66) Nonetheless, there is another assertion Walcott seems to make that while utilising Christian imagery and themes, he does so not within a religious framework but as part of the cultural inheritance of colonisation. Fred D'Aguiar argues in his "In God We Troust: Derek Walcott and God", that Walcott moves beyond Christianity to a secular space in poetry through his engagement with Christian symbolism (221). Therefore, like the duality of his racial identity, the schism in his Methodist upbringing, while located in a largely Catholic milieu, created another avenue to question the authority of religious certainty, or as Walcott puts it: "...to be able to ask questions as a Protestant, to question large authority." (Hamner 67)

Walcott's father, a civil servant, died young at the age of thirty-one; Walcott and his playwright twin brother Roderick Walcott were born after his death. While Walcott's father was a poet and a painter, it was Walcott's mother who inculcated a love of literature in her children. Walcott was educated within an English education system.

He finished his elementary and secondary education at Castries and later studied at the University College of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica and moved to Trinidad in 1953 before he subsequently moved on to take positions as teacher and poet-in-residence at varied American universities. The poetry that results from before Walcott's dual citizenship in the Caribbean and America is generally referred to as the "Caribbean phase" of his poetry, which is marked by strong concerns with the Caribbean milieu and identity1. Walcott was part of the boom in Caribbean literature in the twentieth century. This boom included authors like V.S. Naipaul (1932), C.L.R. James (1901–1989), George Lamming (1927–) and Samuel Selvon (1923–1994) in the English islands, and Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Édouard Glissant (1928–2011), Patrick Chamoiseau (1953) and Maryse Condé (1937) on the French islands.

His migrant position in America led him to forge strong ties of friendship with fellow outsiders and Nobel Laureates, Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) and Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996) and his writing from the 1980s onwards explores the identity of the exile and evolves his engagement with imagination and memory as a counterpoint to the burden of official history. Walcott's position as a Caribbean citizen and his subsequent status as a dual citizen allow his literary work to be grounded in what are conventional postcolonial preoccupations. Some of the predominant concerns of Walcott's poetry are the colonised subject's negotiation of colonial identity, the reflections of a colonised past within a postcolonial world, the ambiguity of the colonised subject's engagement with Eurocentricism and the advent of a linguistic reappropriation through a creolised English.

Walcott began his literary career fairly early. By the age of nineteen, Walcott, with the financial aid of his mother, self-published his first two collections of poetry: *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* (1949). He recovered the costs of publication by selling copies to his friends. His subsequent collections include *Poems* (1951) and *In a Green Night: Poems 1948–60* (1962), the anthology that brought him to the attention of the western world. He went on to publish *Selected Poems* (1964), *The Castaway and Other Poems*

(1965), *The Gulf and Other Poems* (1969), *Another Life* (1973), *Sea Grapes* (1976), *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979), *Selected Poetry* (1981), *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *The Caribbean Poetry of Derek Walcott and the Art of Romare Bearden* (1983), *Midsummer* (1984), *Collected Poems, 1948–1984* (1986), *The Arkansas Testament* (1987). His acclaimed epic poem *Omeros* which is considered his *magnum opus* was published in 1990, followed by *The Bounty* (1997), *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (2007), *White Egrets* (2010) and *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948–2013* (2014).

Although Walcott's literary career has been established on the basis of his poetry, he is also a renowned playwright. He published and directed his first play *Henri Christophe: A Chronicle in Seven Scenes* in 1950 when he was only twenty years old. He founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959 and worked with it until the late 1970s when financial reasons coerced him to migrate to the United States. The body of plays written, directed and published by Walcott is substantial and has perhaps not received the critical acclaim that his poetry has. Walcott's plays include *Harry Dernier: A Play for Radio Production* (1951), *Wine of the Country* (1953), *The Sea at Dauphin: A Play in One Act* (1954), *Ione* (1957), *Drums and Colours: An Epic Drama* (1958), *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958), *Malcochon: or, Six in the Rain* (1966). His most acclaimed play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was published in 1967; apart from being an engagement with poetic language and the patois dialect of West Indies, the play is also a stylistic engagement with the politics of the Caribbean. Walcott has compared the stylisation of the play to the Japanese Kabuki theatre. He subsequent plays are *In a Fine Castle* (1970), *The Joker of Seville* (1974), *The Charlatan* (1974), *O Babylon!* (1976), *Remembrance* (1977), *Pantomime* (1980), *The Isle is Full of Noises* (1982), *The Haitian Earth* (1984), *The Last Carnival* (1986), *Beef, No Chicken* (1986), *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1986), *Steel* (1991), *Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1993), *The Capeman* (in collaboration with Paul Simon, 1997), *Walker and The Ghost Dance* (2002), *Moon-Child* (2011) and *O Starry Starry Night* (2014).

Amongst Walcott's critical and non-literary work his most renowned are his 1996 collaboration with Joseph Brodsky and

Seamus Heaney, *Homage to Robert Frost* and his 1998 anthology of essays *What the Twilight Says*. His 1973 autobiography in verse *Another Life* enjoys the twofold status of being both a poem and a critical examination of Walcott's views on poetry, imagination, memory and history.

Derek Walcott: The Caribbean, History and Postcolonial Identity

> But the people do not want poetry. They want its concomitants: explanation, justification, order. They want not the poetry, but the poet.
>
> —*Derek Walcott* (in Hamner 33)

Walcott's quote from a paper titled "The Figure of Crusoe" presented at the University of West Indies, Trinidad in 1965 posits the underlying tensions that exist for a poet categorised as postcolonial. While the quote might read as a need to escape the associations of being a postcolonial poet alongside being an appeal for a consideration of aestheticism over political and other contextual alliances, it would be reductive to read it as such. The quote has to be read within i) the context of Walcott's own biography — the much referred-to racial dynamic of his two white grandfathers, one Dutch and one English, and his two black grandmothers and ii) his own particular engagement with colonial and postcolonial historiography. This dual ancestry frames the seemingly angst-ridden query of the protagonist in his poem "A Far Cry from Africa": "I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" while his dismissal of the Eurocentric progressive view of history is made apparent in these lines from "The Sea is History": "but that was not History, / that was only faith, and then each rock broke into its own nation."

Nonetheless, this duality is not unique to Walcott. The Caribbean environment of the colonial experience is driven by its dual heritage, this schizophrenic tussle of two ancestries. It is part of the inherited cultural tradition of the Caribbean experience that is simultaneously caught between Western and African influences. The split between the two races "is equivalent to a state of schizophrenia." (Ciccarelli 39) Through the quote in the Crusoe essay, Walcott makes apparent

that the self-labelled schizophrenia of his existence is both the arena of his poetic engagement as well as the basis for his dismissal of history as a movement from the dark savage "primitivism" of a colonised past to the enlightening advent of the gift of "civilization" to the non-European world. Such a view of history as "progressive", for Walcott, is rooted within a limiting and narrow Eurocentric discursive tradition. The identity of the colonised subject has to move beyond such a restrictive framework for it to escape the anxiety of historiography and a need to constantly affirm the validity of a pre-colonial past. It is this negotiation with colonised identity and the more particular nuances of Caribbean subjectivity that Walcott addresses in his work.

Walcott, like Achebe, is sceptical of looking at a colonial past "with all its imperfections" as "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." ("The Novelist as Teacher", 1965) However, unlike the African context of colonisation, the Caribbean milieu is dictated by a Janus faced regard at both a western and African ancestry. The Caribbean subjectivity and aesthetic is rooted in a self-reflexivity that seems *prima facie* to look at itself as hybrid. As Walcott states in his essay "What the Twilight Says":

> ... so that mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word 'Ashanti' as with the word 'Warwickshire', both separately intimating my grandfather's roots. Both baptising this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this West Indian.
>
> (Walcott, *WTS* 9)

It becomes essential for the reader engaging with Walcott to understand the significance of his hybrid position as "neither proud nor ashamed". As Jahan Ramazani argues in his *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* 'Postcolonial studies offers the metaphor of "hybridity" as a potent lens through which to explore the interculturation in the postcolonial world.'(6) There is in Walcott's statement a need to move beyond the anxiety of affirmation or negation with a Eurocentric cultural allegiance. Walcott's perspective of history is also located in his reservations of an absolute or binding sense of history: "I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the

ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father ... for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates..." (Walcott, "MH" 64). The position that Walcott takes becomes significant within the postcolonial framework because while Walcott's oeuvre participates in conventional postcolonial concerns with identity, enslavement, cultural denigration it simultaneously makes an effort to move beyond them. As Ramazani argues elsewhere in his *Hybrid Muse*,

> Repudiating a separatist aesthetic of affliction, Walcott turns the wound into a resonant site of interethnic connection... vivifying the black Caribbean inheritance of colonial injury and at the same time deconstructing the uniqueness of suffering. Hybrid, polyvalent, and unpredictable in its knitting together of different histories of affliction... (50-51)

It can therefore be surmised that Walcott's oeuvre while making a case for the traumatic advent of colonisation and its ambiguous politics urges the reader to look at the dialectical emergence of a new identity between the confrontations of the old.

> This latter indigenous quantity — the *new* — is the determining one: and what is produced out of the process of appropriation/adaptation is, accordingly, a third, other thing, distinctly of the new environment. For Walcott, it is in this other, third entity, and the process of indigenization from which it is produced, that a native identity consists. As such, it is an identity which, carrying the traces of earlier ancestries, is complete with its own ethnic and cultural integrity. (Ismond 110)

This emphasis on the new in Walcott should however not be translated as a rejection of the past or for that matter traditions associated with that past. Especially, considering Walcott's engagement in his works like *Omeros* (1990; Omeros is Greek for Homer) that revisits the Greek classic within a Caribbean paradigm. Walcott's understanding of history is rooted in his rejection of colonial history as a metanarrative that subsumes all other aspects of subjectivisation. In his "The Muse of History" he argues that "New World poets who see the 'classic style' as stasis must see it also as historical degradation, rejecting it as the language of the master."(39) Walcott considers this a self-torture wherein the poet "limits his memory to the suffering of the victim" and his "language to phonetic pain, the groan of

suffering, the curse of revenge"(39-40). Such a poet, Walcott subsequently argues, "cannot separate the rage of Caliban from the beauty of his speech when the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor. The language of the torturer mastered by the victim. This is viewed as servitude, not as victory." (40) The restriction of the postcolonial writer to a view where the only image of Caliban is mired in victimhood and offers no subversive potential is, for Walcott, one of the fallouts of the colonial experience. In as much as this is concerned, he rejects the idea of history itself and foregrounds the notion that:

> In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.
>
> (Walcott, "Culture or Mimicry" (CM) 6)

Walcott's argument on its surface seems to abide by the extreme position that V.S. Naipaul takes in his *The Middle Passage*: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies."(29), however, Walcott offers us a truly postmodern position in defeating the purpose of a history that constantly undermines identity and continues to exploit the Caribbean individual's anxiety of a lost genealogy. All colonial history for Walcott is a perpetuation of the myth of European superiority which subsumes the possibility of a past for the colonised subject. The process of Eurocentric historiography alienates the native from a pre-colonial past or as Edward Baugh states in his essay "The West Indian Writer and his Quarrel with History": 'Behind the argument for historylessness is a basically determinist view of history, that would condemn us to being, indeed forever, the slaves of history.'(64) Such subjugation would replace one form of enslavement with another. The colonial master is replaced by colonial history and the native subject is coerced to forget a racial identity before the advent of colonisation. It is this conditioned "amnesia of the races" that Walcott counteracts with imagination. Literature or art then, for Walcott, offers the possibility for racial recovery. Alternatively, perhaps, more precisely, it offers

the colonised subject the ability to transcend the quagmire of the colonised identity through an imaginative exploration of that very same experience.

To return once again to Walcott's quote from "The Figure of Crusoe", it is this need to read colonised identity within a definitive historical paradigm that becomes one of the fallouts of postcolonial discourse. Poetry becomes subsumed by the figure of the poet; imagination while counteracting colonial history is appropriated by it. To address this dilemma, the figure of an Adamic Crusoe who discovers and names has to be replaced by the figure of Caliban, who is the colonial embodiment of the Caribbean native. The Caliban symbol in the Caribbean cultural paradigm represents the native who is the white-man's (Prospero's) experiment. Caliban is given language, identity, knowledge and thereby the opportunity for individuation by Prospero. However, this very framework restricts, restrains and limits the potential for self-fashioning in Caliban because it is mediated within a colonial performative amphitheatre, defeating any possibility of authentic individuation. It is only when Caliban protests, resists and rebels that he comes into his own. The figure of Caliban need not operate solely as one represented by the colonial master — brutal, savage and uncivilised but, as Walcott seems to suggest, can be potentially subversive and can be appropriated by the Caribbean subject through an imaginative undertaking that reinvents Prospero's language. This trajectory is clearly outlined by Roberto Fernández Retamar when he claims:

> Prospero invaded the islands, killed our ancestors, enslaved Caliban, and taught him his language to make himself understood. What else can Caliban do but use that same language ... (14)

While there is a case being made for the guiltless use of the coloniser's language, whether English, French or any other within a Caribbean literary tradition, there is also a parallel argument that addresses the relevance of imagination — art or literature — in acting as a counterfoil to the violence of colonial historiography. The coloniser's discovery of the "New world" has to be counteracted by the colonised subject's invention of an alternate *new* world emerging from the dialectic confrontation of the two Caribbean ancestries — western and African.

A Far Cry from Africa

In his poem "A Far Cry from Africa" taken from the anthology *In a Green Night* (1962), Walcott addresses the concerns of a divided identity and the inability to align himself with either the west or Africa. The opening stanza of the poem paints in graphic detail the violence of the Mau Mau rebellion of 1952–1960 in present-day Kenya, Africa. After the arrival of Europeans in the region in the early twentieth century, the native Kikuyu people were subjugated to racial dominance. One section of the community formed the Mau Mau, a terrorist organisation intent on eradicating European influence from the region. The Mau Mau fought a bloody battle against both the British settlers as well as loyalists among the Kikuyu tribe who sided with the British. The uprising resulted in a wide scale rampage through Kenya that deeply divided the Kikuyu community and resulted in numerous war crimes — Kikuyu people were murdered, tortured or herded into huts that were subsequently set on fire by the Mau Mau militants. One of the infamous murders was that of British six-year-old Michael Ruck who was killed by the Mau Mau militants after being dragged from under his bed where he was hiding. (Herne 251) These actions were followed by violent retaliation and executions by the Kikuyu and British militia. The Kikuyu people were forced into concentration camps where they were inhumanely tortured and castrated. Walcott makes an analogy to this when he writes "What is that to the white child hacked in bed/ To savages, expendable as Jews?" Paul Breslin argues that

> It is hard to say at this point whether Walcott is satirizing colonialist judgements of the Kikuyu or to some degree endorsing them. As one follows the further turnings of the poem, one gathers that he does both — the colonizer's response is smugly ethnocentric, and yet it is truly "savage" to butcher children in their sleep. (61)

The ambivalence of Walcott's position with regard to his dual ancestry also provides a sort of underlying irony to the animalistic imagery in the poem. The poem condemns the actions of the Mau Mau rebels and yet is not without its sympathies for them. One however has to be careful not to misunderstand Walcott's regret for endorsement. He

clearly states "Again brutish necessity wipes its hands / upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again/ A waste of our compassion, as with Spain." In as much as this is concerned, Walcott seems to look at the subservience of the "New world" to the "brutish necessity" of its colonial history. Nonetheless, Walcott finds himself alienated by the brutal violence exhibited by both sides — the Kikuyu and the British. He states: "The violence of beast on beast is read / As natural law, but upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain." The utter savagery that the colonial experience has reduced both the Kikuyu and the English to dismays Walcott. "... when the poem moves to the ... savage /civilized binary so often used to construct the relationship between Africa and Europe, it expresses scepticism about such a bifurcation and the boundary between supposed European rationality and African animality is eroded." (Thieme 38) The savagery of the violence unites the Kikuyu and English. The blood strewn "veldt" eliminates the distinction between white and black. It is only the red of destruction and annihilation that remains visible. "Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries: / Waste no compassion on these separate dead!" The worm that feeds on dying and decayed flesh feasts equally on the white as it does on the black. The dead are separated by their seeming positions across the battle lines but are united by the futility of their death and the brutality inflicted by both sides. The strong animalistic imagery in the poem works as a metaphoric engagement with viciousness and is simultaneously evocative of modernistic poetic engagements. As Breslin elaborates:

> The poetic style in which Walcott portrays the violence of the Kikuyu comes from the repertory of modernist neo-primitivism: its animism is reminiscent of Hart Crane (whom, by now, he had read) or D. H. Lawrence, and its density of metaphor follows the high modernist rejection of discursive statement in favor of image and analogy. (61)

Title

The title of the poem connotes that the reality of the Mau Mau is a far cry from the nostalgic Africa invoked in the Caribbean mindset; the poet appears to questions the idea of a peaceful civilization rent asunder by colonisation. The title simultaneously alludes to a loss from this idyllic image of Africa and a sense of alienation that the poet feels towards the continent alongside the anguish of the "cry"

of destruction emerging from the African continent. An additional reading is also that Walcott is suggesting Africa's geographical and cultural separation from Britain.

The first two stanzas of the poem deal with the resurging violence and the pointless and senseless massacre of the Mau Mau uprising. The third stanza explores the poet's own position and his estrangement from both "Africa and the English tongue." The inherent identity crisis of the postcolonial subject is depicted and further problematised by the inability to accede or forsake racial affiliation: "Betray them both, or give back what they give?" It is in this sense that Walcott asks, "I who am poisoned with the blood of both / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" The oft-quoted lines superficially connote Walcott's racial schizophrenia but the poet is also making a larger argument about how racial identity as well as emphasis on ethnocentric purity contaminates the postcolonial subject.

Goats and Monkeys

Walcott's poem "Goats and Monkeys" from his anthology *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) functions as a postcolonial rereading of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The poem begins with an epigraph from Shakespeare's play "...even now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" and at the outset makes clear that Walcott's attention in addressing the text is an exploration of the underlying sexual dynamics of race. The poem beguiles its reader into a false sense of security by seemingly adopting the conventional Manichean binary view of black as bad and white as good. Walcott foregrounds the idea of white embodying purity and innocence and black as polluting and corrupting. It is only in the final lines of the poem wherein he employs the classical dramatic situation of peripeteia[2] wherein the black moor is "... no more / monstrous for being black." The suggestive sarcasm and the engagement with sexual subversion in Walcott's imagery are made apparent in the final stanza. Through the poem he sharply etches out the blackness of Othello in words like "black bull", "panther-black", "blackamoor" contrasting them with the "white flesh" of Desdemona which is further amplified through constantly

personifying her with the moon. Othello is represented as the shadow or eclipse that consumes the moon, tainting its perfection.

Walcott decisively presents Othello as "…Africa, a vast, sidling shadow / that halves your world with doubt." The association of Othello with Africa sets the postcolonial agenda of the poem for the discerning reader. The halving of the western world through the racial binary is further problematized through Walcott's assertion of sexual tension between the "Virgin and ape, maid and malevolent Moor, / their immortal coupling still halves our world." The tide of the poem is a direct reference to Shakespeare's invocation of the lust that drives both Othello and Desdemona — the moor and the maiden — towards their "exogamous coupling": "What shall I say? Where's satisfaction? / It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys," (Act III, Scene iii). One of the dominant anxieties of the early colonisers was the threat to white ethnocentric purity because of the miscegenation or racial comingling inherent in the colonial project. Walcott himself is a product of this comingling. His ancestors were both Africans transported to the Caribbean to work as plantation slaves and Anglo-Saxon Europeans who were responsible for bringing these slaves to the Caribbean.

The sexual suggestiveness of the poem is made transparent in every stanza. Walcott constantly directs the reader's gaze to Desdemona's body; her "lips", "marble throat", "white flesh", the "white fruit" that is her bosom and contrasts it with Othello's "earthen bulk", "raw musk" and the union of the two in a "night-long lechery" is ultimately a "bestial, comic agony". Walcott lays bare the fear of the Other intrinsic to the colonial project. This fear underlies the anxiety of exogamous relationships alongside the dread that such a relationship would "breed horned monsters". These "hybrid" monsters or the offspring of miscegenation question the seemingly inviolate certainty of racial purity and threaten the idea of racial sanctity and supremacy. The threat of Othello and Desdemona's "immortal coupling" lies also in the legitimacy accorded to the relationship through marriage. It is not mere rutting even though Walcott constantly affirms this through his choice of metaphors. It is the fact that this consummation is "immortal", not immoral, that potentially disturbs the Foucauldian

power balance. The risk of Othello and Desdemona's union is that it operates within conventional social norms and as such is validated by the institutional structure of marriage.

There is a parallel argument that Walcott also addresses in the context of the black resistance in America when he talks of Othello's "...racial, panther-black revenge". As Patricia Ismond argues:

> The predicament of Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare's play is used as a metaphor to comment on the cause of black resistance during the rise of racial violence in the United States during the Civil Rights era (the mid-1960s) ... Othello's tragedy is invoked as the tragedy of the betrayal of an ultimate faith, the absolute embodied in Desdemona. The focus completely subordinates the matter of Othello's tragic error, given Desdemona's fidelity and innocence. Empathizing with Othello's sense of betrayal, Walcott defends the cause of the black man in revolt. It is not racial revenge that motivates this revolt, but rather the collapse of the belief system purveyed and corrupted by the white world itself. This betrayal leaves the black man in the Western world without a humanity to believe in... (53)

Walcott's engagement is therefore correspondingly located in looking at the breaking down of a system. The sexual dynamics which is the overall theme of the poem is also haunted by a pervasive intelligence that is aware of a rupture within the system, a concomitant malaise that in allowing the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona and preventing a happy ending for their marriage — sanctifying lust and disallowing love — is invalidating the potential for identity within racial structure. In short, Othello's murder of Desdemona is not the working out of "racial revenge" but is the course of action dictated by a system that does not permit aberrations like the marriage of a black moor to a noble maiden. The Civil Rights era in the United States similarly is directed by a need for assertion against the limitations to identity and subjectivity for a black man in a white world.

Names

The dominant concerns of Walcott's poem "Names" taken from his 1976 anthology *Sea Grapes* are language and its alliance to race. Walcott begins the poem with a pun on the word "race" as significant of both racial identity and his own particular trajectory. The poem,

like most in Walcott's oeuvre, is caught up in the racial halving that his own specific racial identity has contributed towards: "but I looked for that moment / when the mind was halved by a horizon". Walcott's education was within the English system. He was introduced to the English language, its varied linguistic peculiarities and glories while at school in Castries and during his later education in Jamaica. In this poem, Walcott addresses the nuances and the very fact of language in the construction of racial identity: "with no nouns, and with no horizon, / with pebbles under my tongue". The meeting point of Walcott's racial identity as well as the dynamics of interaction between the white colonisers and the colonised races is like the illusory horizon that only appears to be the meeting point of the earth and the sky but is in actuality a separating line between the two. Language and the act of naming is what accords distinctive identity to the racial subject. To be named, to have a name, to name implies existence but each has a different connotation in the execution of power. To be named is to be a passive recipient of an accorded identity; to have a name is to be potentially capable of exercising identity and subversively interrogate the act of naming: to name is to have the authority over identity and identification.

Walcott imposes images of the colonised world: "the goldsmith from Benares", "stonecutter from Canton", "Bronzesmith from Benin" with "the courts of Castille" and "Versailles colonnades". The evocative potential of these images makes the isolated beauty of the two worlds visual for the reader. There is the underlying nostalgic sentimentality in the images from the colonised world and the powerful thrust of the great and glorious past in the images of European grandeur. In juxtaposing the two, Walcott uses the medium of language to express the underlying fracture of his identity: an identical orientation towards both the west and the colonised world. It is language that allows him the avenue to address the horizon, or separating line, that is his identity.

The act of naming has to be looked on as the act of christening within the colonial framework. The colonised world loses its own history and becomes subsumed in the broader narrative of Eurocentricism through being linguistically appropriated by the

western world. As Walcott so woefully claims in the poem: "Being men, they could not live/ except when they first presumed / the right of everything to be a noun. / The African acquiesced, / repeated, and changed them." There is also a sense of trepidation in Walcott when he asks, "And when they named these bays/ bays, / was it nostalgia or irony?" he looks at the act of naming as one which for the coloniser is also imbued with loss. The "cabbage palms" and the "pigsty" cannot be the recipients of names that evoke Castille, Versailles or the Corinthian and yet these undeserving attributes of the colonies are elevated through their linguistic association with symbols of aesthetic and cultural splendour in the western world. As Elleke Boehmer argues in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*:

> From the European point of view, therefore, colonialism was a metaphoric and cartographic — as well as a legalistic — undertaking. A country was 'mapped' or spacially conceived using figures which harked back to home ground.... Classifications and codes imported from Europe were matched to peoples, cultures, and topographies that were entirely un-European... New places, named after regions and towns left behind, recreated in some part the symbolic experience of the old world. But at the same time they marked out a new region, where a new life could begin to unfold. Naming set up a synchronous timeframe for the colonies: though not Europe, they were declared to be contiguous to Europe, and subject to it. (17)

It is in this sense of the new world being subject to Europe that Walcott engages with the politics of naming and its precarious relationship with memory. The act of renaming is also an act of letting go or disremembering. Naming also involves "the amnesia of the races" that makes "imagination as necessity". The precolonised past has to be forgotten for a colonised future to exist. As Walcott states in the poem: "I began with no memory, / I began with no future". The loss of memory is simultaneously a wound that cannot be healed and also the site for subjectivity in the colonised self. Nonetheless, the lack of a future invalidates the past and in doing so offers an arena of (re)claiming identity for the racial subject. In short, imagination and by association language allows the colonised subject to create his identity. It is this double movement into contrary designs and functions that characterises Walcott's poetry, especially the poems

from the Caribbean phase that strongly illustrate his postcolonial moorings. In as much as this is concerned, Walcott's poetry 'is a rechristening that sees the New World as a palimpsest[3] and poetry as the adamic task of turning away from the allure of fading names, histories, and meanings in order to keep language fresh and alive to the demands of the natural present.' (Handley, 292) To view Walcott's poem as a palimpsest is to understand the nuanced arguments that go into the making of postcolonial identity. The trauma and loss associated with colonisation is undercut by a simultaneous regard for the coloniser's culture and history to which the racial amnesia of an African past acts as a counterfoil. The "...terrible vowel, / that I!" emerges out of this nexus — a sense of history that is opposed by this emerging historylessness. Language is the solution that Walcott offers to bring together these two opposing tendencies. The native tongue is trained to speak an alien language that in the act of speech no longer remains alien. As stated earlier, Caliban appropriates Prospero's language and uses it to forge his identity.

Walcott's use of the coloniser's language to retrace a racial ancestry through a linguistic trajectory becomes the dominant preoccupation of the poem. While the poems under discussion do not depict the *patois* or the *creolised* language that emerges out of cultural mingling of the Caribbean and European races, Walcott plays with language and uses the hybrid *patois* in some of his works, especially *Omeros* and his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967). The ideational discourse on language in the current poem finds an illustration in others. Walcott's "Names" can therefore be seen as the poet's outlining of some of his linguistic concerns in his works.

In the final lines of the poem, however, Walcott makes apparent that the acquisition of language has not been without violence. The viciousness of a possibly missionary classroom is depicted alongside the racism that drives colonial educational setups: "tell me, what do they look like? / Answer, you damned little Arabs!" The response to the same is an embittered ironical self-reflexive "Sir, fireflies caught in molasses." The allure of the coloniser's history and culture is a strong one that is more often than not detrimental to the colonised subject.

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Notes

1. It has to be noted that the three Walcott poems prescribed in the current paper are all from Walcott's Caribbean phase.
2. According to Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in his Poetics (335 BCE), peripeteia is the reversal of situation in drama wherein a turning point occurs that totally upturns the sequence of events and connotes the exact opposite of the thus far established course of action.
3. A palimpsest is a written material or manuscript on which later day writing is superimposed on prior writing that has been erased or washed out.

A Far Cry From Africa*

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"
Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?
To savages, expendable as Jews?

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break
In a white dust of ibises whose cries
Have wheeled since civilization's dawn
From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.
The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.
Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
While he calls courage still that native dread
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,

* From *In a Green Night* (1962)

The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
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 Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?

Notes

Title: The poem is divided into three stanzas with a sequential increase in the number of lines. The first stanza has ten lines, the second eleven and the third twelve.

2 *Kikuyu*: The Kikuyu are the largest ethnic group in Kenya. The reference that Walcott is making here however is to the Mau Mau uprising that took place between 1952–1960. The uprising was a result of wide scale unrest and dissatisfaction among select sections of the Kikuyu against the British rule. The Mau Mau were generally seen as a terrorist outfit by the colonisers. During the Mau Mau rebellion various atrocities were committed by the Kikuyu who had aligned themselves with the rebellion. People were tortured, hacked, burnt alive, flogged. The Mau Mau also caused a divisive split in the Kikuyu community between those who were loyal to the British and those who had aligned themselves to the Mau Mau. While this is the general narrative of the Mau Mau rebellion, the British side had also committed atrocities to curb the rebellion. Concentration camps were set up wherein suspects were tortured, sexually violated, castrated. The Kenyan government also recognises the Mau Mau rebels as nationalist heroes or freedom fighters. The role of the Mau Mau in ensuring independence for Kenya and the subsequent process of decolonisation is debatable with different camps arguing for and downplaying the significance of the Mau Mau.

3 *veldt*: Word of Dutch origin that means grasslands with scarce vegetation.

4 The depiction of violence and bloodshed integral to the Mau Mau uprising. The savagery of the Mau Mau which was a fallout of the colonisation process is looked at with regret.

5 Walcott is deploying irony and sarcasm to look at the futility of death. The

assignation of a military title to the worm that thrives on carrion or decayed and rotting flesh is relevant owing to the militant nature of the rebellion and the subsequent rebuttal offered by the British military. Also, note Walcott's use of alliteration.

6 The poet distances himself from both the African and the British sides. The violence committed by both parties has alienated him from either cause.

8 The brutality of the Mau Mau is undermined by the academic debate that focuses on mere official statistics and creates an official or historical narrative merely from the colonial perspective, leaving out the horror of racial discrimination and the trauma of communal friction amongst the Kikuyu themselves.

9 The reference here is probably to the murder of six-year old Michael Ruck which was one of the worst of the Mau Mau crimes. British farmer Roger Ruck, his wife Esme, and young son, Michael were brutally hacked to death.

10 The line explores the similarity between the concentration camps setup by Hitler during World War II and those setup by the British during the Mau Mau uprising. It also simultaneously allies the Kikuyu "savages" with the Jews, both races were expendable to Eurocentric purists.

13 The idyllic landscape of Africa is represented in these lines. The flight of white ibises is accompanied by their cries which appeals to both the eye and ear.

16 *natural law*: The emphasis here is on the hierarchy that distinguishes the weak from the strong. In the natural world the strong thrive through their killing of the weak. Walcott allies this to the racial dynamics of colonisation.

17 Unlike the beasts who kill and dominate to survive and feed, the actions of men are driven by egocentric purposes. Man seeks to attain greater status through tyrannising his fellow men.

18 Beasts get into a rampage only when driven by fear. Man however needs no cause.

19 The allusion is both to the racial conflict between Africa and the West as well as to some traditions in African tribes where tribesmen participate in war dances before engaging in warfare.

21 The poet emphasises the need for the native African to gather courage when faced with the idea of a peace begotten by the white, an through the death of the colonised races.

23 The need for racial domination seems to be intrinsic to social structure. Walcott uses irony to examine how the veneer of civilization cloaks the true motive of the colonising project.

24 *A ... compassion*: The brutal insubordination meted out to the colonised races is decried as the "white man's burden" when it is anything but that. The compassion sought by the white man for his attempt to civilize the savage native has no consequence.

24 *Spain*: This is a reference to the Spanish colonisation of the Caribbean nations from the sixteenth century onwards which led to the arrival of slaves from Africa to work on the plantations. It also alludes to the fact that Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) discovered West Indies while searching for India. The naming of the region is also because of Columbus' unintended discovery so as to distinguish it from India.

25 Walcott uses the metaphor of the gorilla to depict the colonial perception of the African as brutish, animalistic and unintelligent. The white man's racial superiority is established through his characterisation as superman. There is a Nietzschean undercurrent to Walcott's declaration of the same. The German philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) in his *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) describes the *ubermensch* or the superman as a man who in himself decides the course of history and because of his potential to influence the course of humanity is beyond all laws, morals and norms. A similar ideology was exhibited by Hitler in his declaration of German superiority during World War II.

27 Walcott is making a reference to his dual ancestry — his two white grandfathers and his two black grandmothers. In invoking his mixed heritage he simultaneously makes a case for the hybrid individual who has been influenced by both cultures. The underlying emergence of hybridity and the anxieties it causes are invoked in these lines.

29 The poet associates the actions and polices of British governance to the decisions taken by a drunken man. He suggests that the colonial rule is like a drunkard's activities — reckless, meaningless and without reason.

30 The poet is making a reference here to the schizophrenia that plagues Caribbean and other postcolonial writers. In spite of the brutal history of colonisation, the colonised races have come to regard the culture and language of the coloniser as part of their own history. This regard however comes with a certain guilt of being disloyal to one's native heritage. However, the precarious position of the postcolonial subject has to be understood as precisely this: to be caught between acknowledging the damage that colonisation has done to one's own socio-cultural milieu and to simultaneously find succor in the coloniser's own socio-cultural and linguistic traditions. A parallel reference is also being made to the relevance of language within the postcolonial context. The system of institutionalised education within the

colonies was a consequence of the colonial process. Schools were set up as structures to coerce and condition the natives into accepting the colonial rule and the superiority of the coloniser's culture. The damage inflicted by such a system on the indigenous cultural milieu notwithstanding, it introduced the native to the colonial tongue — English in the case of Walcott. In spite of his Caribbean identity, Walcott acknowledges the deep influence and regard he has for the English literary tradition and it is this that he is making reference to here.

31 The first reference is suggestively rhetorical. Walcott asks whether he ought to betray both ancestries, perhaps alluding to the fact that there is no respite for the colonial subject from either. The second is another reference to the linguistic paradigm of colonisation. Walcott's use of creole in his literary work is seen as an assertion of his hybrid identity. It is this writing in two tongues that allows Walcott to counter the dilemma of a dual heritage.

33 The poet makes another series of rhetorical questions that carry forward his sense of guilt for the use and love of the English tongue and culture. The tone of questioning in the lines seemingly absolves the poet from being completely disloyal to his African heritage. The suggestion is that the ability to question not only depicts his own internal turmoil but prevents him from becoming an absolute defender of the coloniser's culture. The final line of the poem is also a reference to his inability to both accept and turn away from the Mau Mau uprising. The loss of humanity in the acts committed by the Mau Mau during the uprising is, for Walcott, one of the fallouts of colonisation. In short, there is a conundrum that Walcott is asserting: it is colonisation that has made the Kikuyu act like brutal savages. The European imperialists defended colonisation on the grounds of bringing civilization to the savages, the detriment being that colonisation has actually rendered sections of the Kikuyu violent. This is something that Walcott explores on an individual scale in his reading of Othello in his poem "Goats and Monkeys."