Interview

Abstract
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Can I start by asking you where you are now living and working?

What I've been doing recently is getting invitations to be at various American universities for one semester at a time — I've been at Yale, in the department of Afro-American studies, and also in the drama department with young playwrights; and I've been at Columbia, this is now my second time there, and I'm also doing a class at New York University with Joseph Brodsky. The two of us share a class — I've never done this before — and I find it quite exciting. Next year I'm going to be at Harvard doing the same thing as Seamus Heaney did. So most of my working life is spent in the States — it's a bit of a wrench, because ideally I would like to teach in the Caribbean in the University, and also work in the theatre there, because the theatre itself is very much a part of my being in the Caribbean.

Does this mean you've had to stop directing, except occasionally?

Well, there is some plan for me to be able to do things in the summer, with a company in the Caribbean, so I hope I shall be able to do theatre work between April and September.

How do you organize time for your writing?

Because I write plays as well as poems, and recently have been working on a prose book as well, I always have something to do in the mornings whether it is re-writing a scene from a play or whatever — I mean I don't
get up in the morning saying 'I am going to write poems', but you can always work on them. My ritual is still, even if I live in a temperate country, to get up very early in the morning, have a cup of coffee, watch the sunrise come up, smoking like hell unfortunately and drinking too much coffee. So my working day, if I've had a good night's sleep, and I try to sleep as much as I can, starts at about 6 a.m. I get tired of work at about half-past ten to eleven in the mornings, and I never work in the afternoons except when I'm lying down scribbling, and never at night, absolutely not at night. It's a terrific kind of life when you're on an island, a small island like Tobago, where you can get up early in the morning — it's cool and it's quiet and beautiful — you work and then go for a swim; that's really millionaire's paradise, but you don't have to be rich to do it though.

Is the Caribbean getting a harder place to live these days?

In many ways, yes.

The Star-apple Kingdom seemed to me a rather anguished poem.

We are going in a very frightening direction. I think part of it is the result of panic. I think the kind of socialism we are embracing — the kind of Marxism if you wish — is on a very superficial level in terms of any effect, any presence it can have in terms of world power. What the leaders in the Caribbean refuse to admit to themselves is that we are powerless. We are powerless people. Or I would say that the real power we have is in our people, in the artists and so on. This may sound very visionary and silly and adolescent, but once the Caribbean accepts the fact that this is where its power lies, then it is possible that what I thought would happen might again begin to be discerned; if we see that the richness we have is in the cultural diversity, the mixture, the fact that we do live together very well, only disturbed by politicians. Anyone can exploit, with the proper techniques, the Afro-Indian division, but the day to day life in Trinidad of African and Indian is visibly normal. Guyana was of course the example — that was provoked.

It is a bitter thing for me to see people manipulated. It becomes more and more infuriating. When you are younger and you don't know who are in power you are in awe. When the people who are in power are in some cases your own age, or younger, then you see them, you see right through them, and that infuriates you.
It's the same everywhere. But presumably underlying those divisions that can be exploited, there is the basic economic problem.

But the economic problem is again exploited — by the old leaning-on-slavery attitude, which is very convenient; or leaning-on-capitalism, or leaning on American interference, or anything you want to lean on but the reality of the fact that you are poor. We still do not tell people that they are poor. The Caribbean politicians describe problems to their own people as if they, the politicians, were spokesmen at the big tables of the world, as if someone from Trinidad or Jamaica really counts for Kissinger or Kosygin.

But I'm saying that one needn't become a satellite simply because one accepts that one is on a lower level of economic life. If only one could be addressed simply and directly by the politicians, saying 'Look, we are poor, this is where we begin'. If the mass says 'Yes, we are poor', then you can say 'What are we going to do about it?' and begin from there. But what is said is something about Russia, or 'America is giving us a hard time', or 'The Arabs are giving us a hard time' — it's a whole system of blaming. I'm not saying the problems aren't there, but instead of turning around and confronting them — which metropolitan countries do because their problems are close to them — we don't do it, we pretend to be metropolitan countries with problems which can be settled around the conference tables of the world. The politicians have a misconception of what the Caribbean people will accept. We have come out of slavery in something close to living memory, and people who have endured that should not be encouraged to think in terms of becoming rich overnight, nor do they believe that it is possible. But if you delude them into thinking either that a completely Socialist economy is going to do that, or that the diametric opposite is going to cure things, then you're doing a very dangerous thing. The violence that has come is a consequence of that lie. We are paying for telling people that if they get rid of X, then it will all be theirs. You give them a sense of inheritance and right which generates a violence. These people put themselves in a position where they themselves will be annihilated by the very people they incite.

I read somewhere (though it doesn't entirely square with my own reading) that in The star-apple Kingdom you are writing in the person of Michael Manley.

It is obviously Jamaica. I am — I was — very close to Michael Manley,
but it isn't him entirely, and of course the poem is modelled very closely on Marques' *Autumn of a Patriarch*. The *persona* is a leader who is in Jamaica, but his background is not Manley's background, there's a great house fiction. So the character does become fictional, but I think what I was concerned about was that Michael does have a profound love of his country, Jamaica, and he's a fighter, and I wanted to catch the poise of anguish that comes from wishing for a kind of order that can only perhaps be imposed by a kind of discipline, 'heavy manners' if you want. The poem is poised at that point and I've been criticised by radicals who say 'It doesn't get you anywhere, it's the usual middle-of-the-road balance thing'. But that's the poise of the poem. My private opinion about what should or should not happen has nothing to do with it. I have always been very careful — that's the balance of the poet — not to move into propaganda, on either side. Rigidity comes in when the poet is tempted in a totalitarian regime to appear to be non-conformist, or in a democratic regime to make sure he is radical enough.

I understand you are bringing out a new volume of poems in the Spring. What direction will that take? You seem recently to have been writing longer poems, a number of them in a *persona* which allows you to develop if not dialect, then an accented version of standard English.

In the new book I have a long poem called 'The Spoiler's Return' which is based on a Calypsonian — I won't go into that, but that's the one dialect poem in there. You see I no longer think in terms of a tool — either dialect or standard English — I think, if it works, it works, for the one or the other.

Perhaps it's the situation in the Caribbean, perhaps it's becoming older and getting a deepening sense of history, but I find myself very drawn, not so much to the style but to the *idea* of the Roman poets. I have this feeling of being on the outskirts, in a colony or provinces that have changed empires, from British to American, and economically I cannot see us avoiding, not a fate but the reality that the world is divided between America, Russia, China. That is what has been happening. I've felt parallel with some of the Latin poets, coming from my archipelago on the fringe towards the capital. I'm interested in that balance. I also think that very often the capital can become numb, because its preoccupation is with power, with the function of power, and somehow the poetry goes out of it. If you want to put it this way you can say that where there's concrete, there the power is, and the further you go from the concrete the more you come to the vegetation, nature and so on.
And the correlative of that is that at the fringes there is no power.

Yet you're drawn to it, you're looking in that direction. I think also that there can be long periods, long, long centuries, in which a civilization can be very powerful and not produce a culture, and we forget that. When we're within a dying system we don't know it is dying. Maybe Europe, for all its economic vigour — I'm not saying it is a dying culture — but maybe it is not the centre of the spirit. The centre of poetry need not be in London — it may be in Wales, it may be anywhere else but in that concrete and steel thing.

I think it's very exciting to be outside English literature, English literature in a hierarchic sense. Now if I wrote well as an Englishman, in any sizeable history of English literature I would at least have a footnote. If I worked hard enough I'd achieve a footnote. There's this hierarchic thing, your name would be there somewhere between A and Z. Now most poets in a tradition have that kind of listlessness that if they work mildly enough something is going to happen, and certainly if they live long enough they will become part of some kind of club. Now we don't have that in the Caribbean luckily. The danger which we do have, of course, is that if you're virtually the only writer in some area you become over-important. But finally your responsibility and your own critical assessment of yourself is freer. You don't really think of yourself as being part of a tradition, nor do you think of yourself as some fantastic pioneer. You simply are in a position where you can judge yourself by what your own estimate of your work is. In that way I'm completely free. I'm not part of the establishment, I'm not part of the gang, I'm not part of the club.

If I've worked out the dates right, you're now fifty, and you've already projected yourself in poems as senex, the oak, and so on. Do you think of life as stages? Do you think of what you have to write now as being different?

In terms of the poetry I think that for a long time I didn't realise that I was being paid any attention to, and that kept me clear-headed. Now I'm a little disconcerted that there are a lot of things being published about my work — a lot of praising things are being said — and I'd like to shake off any responsibility that one might feel about becoming 'important'. I think it's possible to do it because I can always go back to the Caribbean and be just someone else, you know.
And probably to be discovered younger is more dangerous to one’s self-judgement than later.

I think that’s what attracts me to the Roman poets. I think there’s something about age in them that I find understandable — the Horatian farm, that kind of thing, the retreat, not from fame but into a craft. At fifty I feel secure, I think for the first time in my life. Certainly I feel sure about who I am and what I want to do. Towards this period of my life I would like to write just much better, much clearer, much simpler and much more honestly. Not that I was dishonest, but around fifty you come to a kind of honesty in which the awkward can be accepted, and what you’re good at can also be accepted. There’s a kind of equanimity that comes.

Derek Walcott. Photo: Anna Rutherford.