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Abstract

I propose in this paper to look at a new area of concern which appears in Walcott's poetry since he left Trinidad to reside in the United States.' The two volumes appearing since then, *The Fortunate Traveller* (19⁹²) and *Midsummer* (1984), are interesting for what they document of his responses to this change of scene. Most outstanding in this respect is the heightened awareness, on Walcott's part, of the contemporary reality of an international milieu, turning as it does on the axis of relations between the super powers and the Third World, between the metropolitan North and the underdeveloped South. I will focus on *Midsummer* to examine Walcott's engagement with this particular concern.

North and South — A Look at Walcott's *Midsummer*

I propose in this paper to look at a new area of concern which appears in Walcott's poetry since he left Trinidad to reside in the United States.¹ The two volumes appearing since then, *The Fortunate Traveller* (1982) and *Midsummer* (1984), are interesting for what they document of his responses to this change of scene. Most outstanding in this respect is the heightened awareness, on Walcott's part, of the contemporary reality of an international milieu, turning as it does on the axis of relations between the super powers and the Third World, between the metropolitan North and the underdeveloped South. I will focus on *Midsummer* to examine Walcott's engagement with this particular concern.

Curiously enough, most reviewers of *Midsummer* have missed this preoccupation or overlooked it altogether. They have tended to respond mainly to the technical and stylistic strengths of Walcott's verse, which are certainly considerable in this volume. Michael Gilkes, reviewing the book for *Caribbean Contact*, makes this judgment:

For Walcott, whose element is metaphor, there is, however, a mesmeric quality to sheer perception. This limits and often prevents observation from evolving into more than a style, a reordering of form.... *Midsummer's* focus is uncompromisingly on poetic language and structure, its underlying desire for permanence, for 'eternal lines', not engagement.²

This has been the general response. Terry Eagleton seems to have been the only one sensitive to the creative tensions implicit in Walcott's peculiar cultivation of language in this work. He observes:

To write like Walcott of Caribbean canefields 'set like stanzas' is to be wryly conscious of the rift between Third World agriculture and that other form of cultivation which is poetry.... Language never fits geography, Walcott reflects, and the imagination must therefore weave its own cosmopolitan correspondences, dismantling and reassembling places, playing off one native dialect against another.³

Midsummer does range, in fact, over a number of distinct concerns. There are poems dealing with Walcott's assessment of his life's work, prompted by the personal burden of this 'last third of his life'; poems which return to the untiring question of the Imagination as it serves reality; poems that commute, like Walcott himself, between the metropolitan scenes of North America and the Caribbean landscape. It may be that the connecting thread of engagement is lost as one moves from one subject to the other. Walcott is, however, as intensely engaged as ever in serious moral responses to these preoccupations. We can make value-judgments about these responses, but we cannot say that they are not there.

The burden of relations between the two worlds of North and South, our specific subject here, takes a special prominence in this volume, and engages his close attention. Several significant aspects of his perspective on the subject stand out, and are focused in some of the strongest poems of the volume. He looks closely, for example, at the pressures and strains of what he describes as 'hemispheres [that] lie sweating, flesh to flesh'; he is acutely sensitive to the climate of global warfare that envelops and exacerbates these tensions. He addresses some of the critical issues involved in an eight-piece sequence on Cuba, the classic product, in his native Caribbean zone, of the collision between North and South, presaged as this is by the conflict between the two ideological worlds of the North's East and West.

Walcott's own attitudes to this shift to North America are reflected in the content and underlying viewpoint of *Midsummer*. He sees himself essentially as traveller, rather than as emigré or poet in exile. This is the starting point of his perspective on the contrasting and unequal worlds of North and South in relation to each other. As traveller, he has come to other climes a seasoned Caribbean poet, and he experiences the stronger gravitational pull back to Caribbean soil. Thus, the midsummer symbol (around which cluster related combinations of meaning) invokes his own tropical climate to situate him in his native habitat both physically and in sensibility. The book thus begins with a sequence on Trinidad. From that home base, he makes his excursions North (covering Europe and the United States) and South. The midsummer symbol, at the same time, stands for that high point of summer at which one season spans all climes. Thus: 'Summer is the same/ everywhere' (VIII, ll. 9-10). Accordingly, the midsummer motif expands to embrace the global overview and universalist reaches to which Walcott's travels naturally lead.

The book begins with the return summer trip⁴ to Trinidad, and renders the impact of the first painful image the landscape presents to one

who has just left the sharply contrasting city-scapes of North America. Flying over Trinidad, Walcott is struck first by a 'dereliction of sunlight' — an image which graphically captures the effect, on coming to the tropics, of a sudden brightness that betrays only the sprawl of poverty. Back on Trinidadian soil, he is assailed by the various impressions of the rawness and poverty of life, of reduced and cramped conditions. He takes a look at the seething commerce amid lower-class vendors and hustlers in down-town Port of Spain, a view most representative of this would-be modern capital of Trinidad. It presents the image of a place still 'dammed' in the rut of underprivilege. He describes it thus:

This Spanish port, piratical in diverseness,
with its one-eyed lighthouse, this damned sea of noise,

...

You can watch it become
more African hourly — crusted roofs, hot as skillets
peppered with cries; between fast-fry wagons,
floating seraphic Muslims cannot make it hush.

...

Stay on the right bank in the imperial dream —

(IV, ll. 1-12)

This is the characteristic tone of the Third World ghetto, pre-urban, still trapped in barrack yard standards of living, and at a very far remove from the metropolitan world he has left behind. Odd traces of modern cosmopolitan influences do appear in this scene, featured in the presence of 'floating seraphic Muslims' who have come on the wave of popular oriental cults flooding the Western world. Walcott's explicit point is that the scene still retains the anachronistic 19th century image of natives in the barrack yard. The 20th century outlook, in other words, has not changed much and the old imperial structure, whatever its new guise, still shows through the large inequalities between developed and underprivileged nations. For Walcott, therefore, to return to these sights is to be assaulted anew by the burdensome love he bears the landscape. He is provoked to despair at the intransigence of its backyard status, and, at the same time, drawn back to the human strengths behind its familiar 'dust and ordinariness'. His recovery of this deep organic bond reminds him of 'Borges' blind love for Buenos Aires' (VI, l. 26).

The poem which immediately follows shifts to the metropolitan ghetto in New York. In this scene of Third World migrants in the heart of New York, the two worlds come closest to each other physically, and Walcott takes a critical look at the social and political complexion of that weird contact. New York's Fourteenth Street presents the picture of a veritable

potpourri, a 'colourful' confusion, as the city's depressed elements hustle a living along its sidewalks. Migrant groups are especially conspicuous, with Hispanics and West Indians huckstering exotic bits of their culture. The Third World seems to have quite taken over. Walcott renders the ironies of the scene. The satiric edge of his portrait is enhanced by the sheer verbal playfulness that continues to enliven his style:

In muslim midsummer along Fourteenth Street, hucksters
with cardboard luggage stacked near the peeling rind
of advertisements have made the Big Apple a mango;
shy as wallflowers at first, the dazed high-rises
rock to reggae and salsa; democracy's price is
two steps forward and three steps back in the Aztec tango
of assimilation, with no bar to the barrio.

(V, ll. 6-12)

It is a grim reflection, as the poem goes on to state, of what the politics of patronage and America's open-door policy to its wards (dependent allies) amount to: a negative 'tolerance' that produces this kind of exercise in minstrelsy and prostitution. The decadence affects unfortunate migrants and host-country alike. Walcott penetrates here the human tragedy of a forced 'mixing' between North and South, based strictly on political expedience, while all the old barriers of race, culture, and inequality persist.

His essential judgment of that relationship is compressed in this emblematic image from the same poem: 'The hemispheres lie sweating, flesh to flesh,/ on a damp bed.' The image sees that relationship as a forced and loveless mating, sterile, and fraught with pressures and tensions. It also discloses the mutual dependence and essential nakedness of both the strong and weak — which is Walcott's final sense of that misalliance. These tensions, moreover, contribute in large measure to the pervasive climate of war and aggression. The sense of worldwide war and aggression is one of the things that has registered most powerfully on Walcott's consciousness since this spell in North America. It is an authentic experience. The newcomer to the States has the sensation of being bombarded by news of wars near and distant pouring in to a veritable centre. The war ethos of present times emerges as one of the most powerful themes in the two latest volumes, and is accompanied by a corresponding urge towards peace, which strikes, perhaps, the deepest chords in Walcott's poetry at this stage. We will return to this feature later.

As traveller spanning both weak and strong nations, however, his gaze

lights especially on the picture of global warfare that lies open beneath. In an outstanding sonnet in the sequence, an aerial survey reveals the dynamic that brings the entire 20th century world into one compass: one single war-charge gathers force from his own setting at the far edges of the world right up to its nodes at the centres of power. Thus:

Rest, Christ! from tireless war. See it's midsummer,
but what roars in the throat of the oaks is martial man,
. . . .

Along the island the almonds seethe with anger,
the wind that churns these orchards of white surf
and whistles dervishes up from the hot sand
revolves this globe, this painted O that spins,
reciting as it moves, tribes, frontiers,
dots that are sounds, cities that love their names,
(XXII, ll. 1-14)

Walcott is concerned in this poem to put his fingers on the root sources on that peculiar ethos that causes 'nation to take on nation'.

Though they have different sounds for 'God' or 'hunger',
the opposing alphabets in city squares
shout with one voice, nation takes on nation,
and, from their fury of pronunciation
children lie torn on rubble for a noun.
(XXII, ll. 16-20)

He zeroes in on the old problem of bigotry between peoples, of their blind intolerance of each other's creeds and systems. The tragic irony is that in the righteous extremes of each to defend his own, the original human factor becomes eclipsed and life itself destroyed. Walcott looks here at the tyranny of ideology over the human mind as a specific phenomenon of modern times.

The ideological issue crops up quite frequently in this volume and he shows a keen sense of the political realities involved. A clear and consistent position emerges on the issue. The ideological strongholds of West and East are to him imperial systems first and last. He starts out with a native dread of the imperial principle at the heart of the purism of Left and Right alike. It is not a matter of political agnosticism on Walcott's part. Simone de Beauvoir defines the ideal stance for the intellectual and artist in these times as follows: a non-aligned, neutral position that above all allows her/him the freedom to respond critically to the systems and movements of the time.⁵ It may be necessary to add that to be 'non-aligned' is not to be uncommitted.

The essential aspects of Walcott's perspective on the issue and his sense of its urgency and relevance to the Third World situation, emerges in the eight-piece sequence on Cuba, entitled 'Tropic Zone'. The sequence, one of the finest things in the collection, reproduces a visit to Cuba during which he takes a close-up, sustained view of that country. There is an honesty, an openness, in his first responses to the place. He registers something of the culture-shock of the Westerner to the socialist atmosphere of Cuba ('I know I would feel disoriented/ in Oriente'); he is particularly sensitive to the alienness of a place with a different language; he sees and relates to a pristine emptiness about Cuba, the green landscape of a young nation awaiting development. The full visage of the society, its public features and human aspects gradually unfold as the sequence moves from dawn, through high noon, to siesta time in Cuba.

Responding to such striking features as the signs of a military presence, various municipal features that show the collective system in action, he has deep fears about the dangers of repressive extremes in the system. They are the familiar fears about the dehumanising effects of standardization and regimentation, of the threat to individuality and, most fatally, to independent thought. He expresses it thus:

Imagine the fading hysteria
of peeling advertisements, and note how all graffiti agree
with the government. You might say, Yes, but here are mountains,
park benches, working fountains, a brass band on Sundays,
. . .
that the three men talk softly, that mothers call
from identical windows for their children to come home,
(XLIII, vii, ll. 9-11)

In his view, the Revolution has swung from the corrupt extremes of the Capitalist system, to another kind of serious damage in its own extremes. He describes it thus:

Now the women who were folded over wrought-iron
balconies like bedsteads, their black manes hanging down,
are not whores with roses but dolls broken in half.
(XLIII, iv, ll. 15-17)

In which, one must admit, socialist Cuba does come off worse (one can do so much more with 'whores with roses' than 'dolls broken in half'). A certain element of sentimentality, really a species of literary nostalgia, does creep into this bias. In another poem, Walcott empathises with the older generation of men whom he sees as remaining in temper beyond the

pale of the revolution. He imagines them recalling the gracious old days of Spanish creole culture, days when 'everyone wore white, and there was grace'. It is doubtful whether these men recall more of those days than of the oppressions of the Batista regime.

Walcott has genuine concerns, however, about the possible directions of Castro's Cuba. He fears, for example, that it might be forced to develop into a system of rule, a mini-Empire in its own right. But the real, sympathetic spirit of his concern, and the breadth of awareness informing his reaction, are expressed in the note on which he leaves Cuba. At the end of his survey of its problems, he makes the following reflection on its destiny:

So what if the hand of the Empire is as slow as
a turtle signing the surf when it comes to treaties?
Genius will come to contradict history,
and that's there in their brown bodies, in the olives of eyes,
(XLIII, vi, ll. 10-13)

The idea is that men are potentially greater than their achievements and their errors, and from among the people will rise the genius that will initiate whatever change is necessary to rescue Cuba from whatever future crisis or dangers it may face. Walcott responds here from a vision diametrically opposed to a deterministic notion of history. It is the deeper vision of history as process, but accords a central role to men of imagination in that process — an essentially revolutionary vision therefore. Tacitly, it is a positive acknowledgement of Castro and his revolutionary Cuba in that process. In other words, Walcott has got, deep down, good vibes from Cuba. Ultimately, it expresses his instinctive goodwill and compassion towards a struggling people.

As a token of this faith and goodwill, he leaves Cuba in a moment of epiphany inspired by a most moving response to its 'hora de siesta'. The Cuban siesta inspires him to a glimpse of the possibility of a rest from strife, a quietude, of the stillness at the centre. He presents these intimations of 'a sacramental stasis':

And I'd let you sleep. Things topple gradually
when the alarm clock, with its conductor's baton,
begins at one: the cattle fold their knees;
...
Down the white beach, calm as a forehead
that has felt the wind, a sacramental stasis
would bring you sleep, which is midsummer's crown,
sleep that divides its lovers without rancor,

sweat without sin, the furnace without fire
calm without self, the dying with no fear,
(XLIII, viii, ll. 8-23)

This poem comes, in fact, as a parting benediction on Cuba.

Finally, we may allow Walcott, who has been engaged in ceaseless toil at this level from the age of eighteen, this impulse towards peace and rest from strife (it does not mean that he will cease to speak). The crowning expression of this impulse occurs in the concluding poem of *The Fortunate Traveller*. The poem is entitled 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace'. It envisions a temporary respite from the clamour and strife of a troubled world — a moment of mirage when the veil is lifted and we glimpse the possibility of 'the peace that passeth all understanding'. The poem effects and is itself that miracle, in the perfect attunements of its imagery, its movement and cadences. It deserves to be quoted at some length:

Then all the nations of birds lifted together
the huge net of the shadows of this earth
in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,
stitching and crossing it. They lifted up
the shadows of long pines down trackless slopes,
the shadows of glass-faced towers down evening streets
the shadow of a frail plant on a city sill —
the net rising soundless at night, the birds' cries soundless, until
there was no longer dusk, or season, decline, or weather,
only this passage of phantasmal light
that not the narrowest shadow dared to sever.

. . .

it was the light
that you will see at evening on the side of a hill
in yellow October, and no one hearing knew
what change had brought into the raven's cawing
the killdeer's screech, the ember-circling chough
such an immense, soundless, and high concern
for the fields and cities where the birds belong,
except it was their seasonal passing, Love,
made seasonless, . . .
and higher they lifted the net with soundless voices
above all change, betrayals of falling suns,
and this season lasted one moment, like the pause
between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace,
but, for such as our earth is now, it lasted long.

(ll. 1-37)

In such poems, language both *is* and serves experience. And Walcott, far from being its prisoner, is in perfect attunement with it.

1. Walcott left Trinidad in 1981 to take up an appointment in Creative Writing at the University of Boston.
2. Michael Gilkes, review of *Midsummer*, *Caribbean Contact* Vol. 12, No 10 (March 1985), p. 15.
3. Terry Eagleton, review of *Midsummer*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 November 1984, p. 1290.
4. Walcott spends the summer months in the Caribbean each year.
5. Comment made in a portrait of the writer televised as part of a series entitled 'Literary Portraits'. Trinidad and Tobago Television aired the series 1-22 May 1985.

AVIS G. MCDONALD

The Crisis of the Absurd in Orlando Patterson's *An Absence of Ruins*

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus states: 'In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home country or the hope of a promised land.'¹ Orlando Patterson, in a sociological monograph, describes 'the modern crisis' as 'the problem of exile, alienation, rootlessness, being and identity'.² Patterson's fictional works, as well as his non-fictional studies in sociology and social philosophy, are explicitly and heavily indebted to the writings of Camus and Sartre.³ Indeed, he finds in Existentialism the deepest analysis of the 'modern crisis' or, as he also terms it, the 'exilic crisis'.

In the post-modernist, post-Sartrean, post-existentialist world of the 1980s, Sartre and Camus can be seen as representative figures of a dated ideology.⁴ But the fact that the Existentialist Absurd seemed for a time to