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Gordon Collier

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Abstract
Although one is always ultimately engrossed in the primary world of Walcott's poems and plays, there is also, as a kind of referential reflex, the contrary motion of glimpsing and seeking thematic and even stylistic interconnections, parallels and contrasts within the secondary world of his essays, articles, published talks, and interviews. Walcott's Stockholm acceptance speech, 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory' is at the very least a further valuable contribution to the debate on the nature of West Indian literary culture. But the fact of the Nobel Prize, however cynical we might normally be about the possible motivation of the selection committee from year to year, and the fact that Walcott was perfectly prepared to accept the honour and write the mandatory lecture, may lead us to look at its text with a more broadly enquiring eye. He was, after all, not just addressing his immediate audience in Stockholm; he was speaking to and for the world of all those for whom literary art means something, and specifically for the smaller world of the archipelago. In view of the citation of the Swedish Academy of Letters, that through Walcott 'West Indian culture has found its great poet', for whom 'three loyalties are central ... the Caribbean where he lives, the English language, and his African origin', and that the award was made 'for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment', we might expect him in his lecture to be addressing the topic of that Caribbean world and his place within it.
Although one is always ultimately engrossed in the primary world of Walcott’s poems and plays, there is also, as a kind of referential reflex, the contrary motion of glimpsing and seeking thematic and even stylistic interconnections, parallels and contrasts within the secondary world of his essays, articles, published talks, and interviews. Walcott’s Stockholm acceptance speech, ‘The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory’, is at the very least a further valuable contribution to the debate on the nature of West Indian literary culture. But the fact of the Nobel Prize, however cynical we might normally be about the possible motivation of the selection committee from year to year, and the fact that Walcott was perfectly prepared to accept the honour and write the mandatory lecture, may lead us to look at its text with a more broadly enquiring eye. He was, after all, not just addressing his immediate audience in Stockholm; he was speaking to and for the world of all those for whom literary art means something, and specifically for the smaller world of the archipelago. In view of the citation of the Swedish Academy of Letters, that through Walcott ‘West Indian culture has found its great poet’, for whom ‘three loyalties are central ... the Caribbean where he lives, the English language, and his African origin’, and that the award was made ‘for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment’, we might expect him in his lecture to be addressing the topic of that Caribbean world and his place within it.

Under ‘normal’ circumstances, he could say anything he wanted to, and he has certainly earned that right. What one notices straight away is the fact that the honorific context itself has not deflected him from his purpose. Like such predecessors as Thomas Mann, William Faulkner, and his close friend Joseph Brodsky, Walcott doesn’t waste his breath devising ingeniously diplomatic flatteries relating to this occasion. Instead, as we shall see, he takes his listeners immediately into a world that is the opposite of that cool, Nordic calm. The Nobel Prize framework sets up expectations of something quintessential, where the recipient of the prize
pulls out, if not all, then at least most of the stops. The example which comes to mind is Faulkner, who provided an epitome of his way of looking at history and art, honing and polishing the great, sweeping abstractions and generalizations that we find saturating his fiction, and confirming that 'the eternal verities' shall prevail. Walcott, we might expect, would offer his own summa or quintessence. Now, Walcott is no friend of history as we think we know it; but the Faulknerian model can still be applied, as the Southerner also distrusted history's linearities, preferring to nurture a vision of dynastic mythography. Walcott, too, displaces history into other categories of experience more relevant to his view of the Caribbean.

Unlike Faulkner, Walcott is not at ease in shaping his discourse around abstractions, and is distrustful of prose utterance, despite his many reviews, the few judiciously aimed essays, and the interviews so generously granted. His precondition for departing from the modes of utterance offered by poetry or drama is that there be a concrete occasion or subject for a prose reflection or disquisition. The Nobel Prize award ceremony is such an occasion, no more nor less than a novel or a play or a calypso season. Although, at one stage in the early 1980s, Walcott was working on a longer work of prose, this has never reached the light of day. He can appreciate prose, but is impatient of its causal and sequential predictabilities, especially in the form of prose fiction.

What Walcott does in the Nobel speech is to make the external occasion a concrete specific that is built into the talk, the tenor of which is borne by the vehicle of a complex Caribbean ritual transplanted from another culture. This and other concreta allow him to shape his discourse as closely as possible, short of prosodic measure, to the condition of poetry - or, at least, to a form of prose discourse that approaches the condition of lyrical description. The topic chosen to exemplify the Caribbean condition is not one that Walcott has specifically treated before in his prose (or, indeed, in his poems and plays). But, though the particular topic is what one might least have expected, it potently reinforces and encapsulates Walcott's total vision of the role and responsibility of artist and (wo)man in the Caribbean.

What he does over and above this is to insinuate a number of intertexts/intratexts or preoccupations familiar to us from earlier essays and interviews (as well as in his poetry, of course - but I shall not be taking exploration this far). The combination of resources in this lecture makes it, within its spatial limitations, arguably the closest Walcott has got so far to creating a masterpiece in prose aspiring to poetry, with the tact of his deployment of discourse providing the additional atmosphere of drama.

We must, of course, make due consideration for the exigencies of the occasion: Walcott can attempt a summa, but can't say everything he's ever said that might be important. In terms of the preoccupations of his oeuvre hitherto, it is nevertheless useful to note the kinds of thing he has chosen,
or has been compelled, to leave out. The tonality of the lecture, which I shall be returning to, avoids two extremes characteristic of Walcott, these avoidances constituting an acknowledgement that the rhetorical occasion does not call for a combative stance – there is none of the profound darkness of vision to be found in his two most monumental essays, ‘What the Twilight Says’, with its exploratory, savagely personal distemper and discursive excess, and the better-balanced piece ‘The Muse of History’; and there are none of the amicably sharp, dry put-downs that occur in many shorter essays and interviews. As far as content is concerned, he steers clear of any direct treatment of what we may call the ‘Africa complex’, particularly as set out in his extended polemical essays. Walcott’s talismanically reiterated warning to his fellow West Indians to resist the destructive urge towards bitterness and revenge is not to be heard in the lecture. He makes nothing directly out of his own dual racial personality; instead, this is tactfully displaced onto mention of two other writers with paradigmatic status for him, then is re-fragmented into a multicultural vision. The few writers he does mention are, on the whole, certainly not an inventory of touchstones in his own literary career; the mention of them serves other, non-autobiographical purposes. The place of the writer in the community of artists is adumbrated, but with none of the underpinnings of defensive position-taking that characterize Walcott’s essays and interviews whenever he seeks to define his own artistic integrity against the suspicions of others. For example, no place is made in the lecture for any mention of the central strategic notion of Walcott’s distaste for ‘originality’ at any price. The cultural problems besetting West Indian society – for example, the petty-bourgeois neglect of the arts, which Walcott so often pillories – are not addressed; the occasion of this lecture is not used to settle scores of this pragmatic kind. Nor are the cultural specifics of the West Indian personality brought into the discussion, so that Walcott’s highly differentiated loyalty towards such folk expressions as calypso, Carnival, dance, folk-narrative and dialect forms no part of the texture of discourse. Finally, and a matter pertinent to the drift of his lecture, there is barely the slightest of indications that there might be an epistemological, cultural, even racial or racist divide between the East Indian and the African–Caribbean communities of the West Indies – a contempt of attitude among East Indians in Trinidad towards blacks, a contempt of action or worse in Guyana. This syndrome is a serious-enough matter for Walcott elsewhere, particularly when he is grappling with the often pernicious attitudes of V.S. Naipaul. In the Nobel Prize lecture, Walcott’s concerns are different ones.

I mention this last point because Walcott opens by introducing us to the East Indian population of the village of Felicity, on the edge of the Caroni plain in the north of Trinidad. Walcott is visiting the village with friends from America, to observe the Saturday afternoon preparations for an epic Hindu drama that he has heard and thought about, but never seen.  

3 In the
event, he has to leave before the play itself starts the first leg of its nine-day performance: the play is performed in the two hours before nightfall, but Walcott and his friends want instead to see the scarlet ibises coming home at dusk in the Caroni Swamp.

Walcott puts the chief visual ingredients of the scene in place with a lightness of touch befitting the buoyancy of the light and the atmosphere of preparation, and his implicit role as observer from another culture. (This last role – of being both inside and outside – has been insinuated by the very mention of his ‘American friends’: one outcome of Walcott’s peripatetic alternation between the Caribbean and North America, and the occasion for him to act as knowledgeable yet not all-knowing guide.) The following elements turn out to be poetically strategic to later phases of the lecture: the child-actors assemble ‘on a field strung with different-colored flags’; boys dressed in red and black aim ‘arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light’. A huge effigy of the god Rama lies on the ground in dis-assembled body-sections constructed of woven bamboo-cane; this effigy will be burned on the ninth day of the epic performance.

Upon this base Walcott mounts a variety of observations relating to various cultures; once again, his lightness of touch conceals a larger strategy. With an exclamation, he connects the felicitous buoyancy of the mood to the ‘gentle Anglo-Saxon name’ of the village – or, rather, it is ‘an epical memory’ (that of the Hindu play) that is to be associated with both mood and village-name. The notion of ‘memory’ recurs later. What is hidden in the objet trouvè of Felicity is, however, surely another ‘epical memory’: Felicity was the Roman goddess of good luck, and the emperors granted her prominence as symbolizing the blessings of the imperial regime; the notion of the ‘imperial’ turns up later, and the image of an Anglo-Saxon Empire has already been casually implanted at the very opening of the lecture: the East Indians are in Felicity because the Caroni plain is still a sugar growing area, and indentured cane cutters were brought there after the emancipation of the slaves.

Continuing with this laconic analogism, Walcott draws what he calls ‘a predictable parallel’ between the effigy of Rama and the ‘fallen statue of Ozymandius and his empire’. He then stresses the contrast between this final loss of empire in an empty desert and the cyclical, ‘evergreen’ return of Rama ‘the fragmented god’ after destruction by fire. Final dismemberment is contrasted with cyclical re-memberment.

Walcott doesn’t know what the actors represent, but supposes they are princes and gods. This blithe uncertainty is then generalized self-critically as the embodiment of what he terms ‘our African and Asian diasporas’ – implicitly another form of fragmentation, then. The notion of cultural assumptions and cross-connections now assumes further analogue forms: first, Walcott adapting the Odyssey ‘for a theatre in England’ and expecting the London audience to know the story; second, only the East Indians in Trinidad knowing the stories of the Hindu deities. Gently suggested here
is a local disinclination to meet other cultures half-way; the hidden irony in Walcott’s consciously using the phrase ‘apart from the Indians’ is that the remark reflects a defence-mechanism on the part of black Trinidadians against the contempt shown by a dominant culture. Another irony is also there for the taking: Walcott indicates that the epic of Rama and the epic of Odysseus both stem from Asia Minor. He doesn’t bother to make the link with Ozymandius. Watch Asia Minor, because it returns at the end of Walcott’s lecture.

The idea of cultural assumptions is subjected to further variations. Having mentioned in passing his role as theatre director, Walcott confesses to having tried to regard the epic drama called Ramleela as a piece of theatrical illusion, poorly performed by amateurs who had worked themselves into their roles. Instead, roles were being assumed naturally, as identities in a drama of faith and conviction, a celebration of the reality and ‘validity of India’; the acting would be as buoyant, Walcott says, ‘as those bamboo arrows crisscrossing the afternoon pasture’.

With tactical candour, Walcott accuses himself of a misplaced response: ‘I misread an event through a visual echo of History,’ he says. The sugarcane fields, indenture, ‘the evocation of vanished armies’ and the rest, it is implied, make the play seem to be merely a note in the grand theme of the Ozymandian British Empire, a transplantation. Behind this we again find Walcott’s civil quarrel with V.S. Naipaul: Naipaul believes in the progressive virtues of linear history, Walcott in the recurrences of the mythic. To believe in history means to find nullity or loss in the Caribbean, as Naipaul does – for him, nothing was created there, and Caribbean man is a mimic man. Hence Walcott’s own admission that he has slipped into the expectation that the epic drama will reveal ‘elegy, ... loss, even ... degenerative mimicry’. Instead, he finds ‘a delight of conviction, not loss’, and a sense of felicity. The summative term that Walcott applies here is the opposite of an elegiac mourning for the losses of history – this buoyant term is ‘elation’. Analogical markers occur later, such as ‘ecstasy’, ‘joy’, self-astonishment, surprise, ‘delight’, ‘exultation’, ‘elemental awe’. Indeed, the closing two paragraphs of the lecture speak cumulatively of ‘an alarming joy’, ‘the pain that is joy’, ‘What is joy without fear?’, ‘simple joys’, and a grateful joy. These are certainly abstractions, but they are all clothed in the tangibility of Walcott’s spiritual and artistic commitment to the Caribbean, its manifold inheritances, and his expression of these.

But the term least-employed here, ‘elation’, is that which is central to Walcott’s response, allegiance, and aesthetic; no other term occurs so frequently in his prose writings to characterize elements of a complex psychic continuum of personal interaction with the environment of the Caribbean. The key precursor-text in terms of the arguments Walcott is developing here is the essay ‘The Muse of History’, where passages from Pablo Neruda are associated with the deepest responses of the Caribbean artist: ‘It is this awe of the numinous, this elemental privilege of naming
the new world, which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban (p. 5). In the same essay, the astonishing thing about St-John Perse and Aimé Césaire, for Walcott, 'is their elation, their staggering elation in possibility ... [an] elation in presents' (p. 17). Elsewhere, the exhilarated West Indian artist surveys his island in a condition of 'elation' or 'creative possession'. Offset against this is the history-burdened vision of the Caribbean as shipwreck and fragmentation: to such writers, 'the New World offers not elation but cynicism, a despair at the vices of the Old which they feel must be repeated' ('Muse', p. 7). In an interview with Edward Hirsch, Walcott subverts the notion of history and allies it with the idea of the Caribbean artist making the New World from scratch: all of Walcott's contemporaries, he says, 'had this tremendous sense of elation from really being the owners of a people; I mean, aesthetically, creatively. Having an entire history, an entire country, given to you is a tremendous gift for anyone'. At the age of eighteen, he experienced a 'tremendous elation' while surveying the St Lucian landscape, 'knowing that nobody had really written about this. It was exhilarating to know that I was privileged to be the first one to put down the name of a certain town, or fisherman, or road - a privilege very few writers ever have'. In the broadest experiential terms, Walcott can see in the 'ex-colonies' 'a sort of elation about life' that is different from elsewhere. Although Walcott's specific use of the word 'elation' in the Nobel lecture has the simplest of references - to the East Indians' immediate, unqualified, delighted, unquestioning involvement in the whole physical scene informing the preparations for the drama - the whole range of semantic and contextual implications of the word in the writer's personal lexicon also irradiates the fleeting moment of its use here.

Other central semantic counters now multiply, when Walcott asks his audience to contemplate all the elements of this Asian scene presented so far. The Ozymandias/Rama-effigy word 'fragments' is reinvoked to characterize the punctuation of the Caroni landscape by the cultural traces of India: implicitly, Hindu temples are translated into full-stops, minarets into exclamation-points. In a return to the likes of Naipaul, Walcott claims to understand how these ritual traces can be seen as embarrassing, degenerate parodies. The emerging theme of language now takes the form of Walcott's own parodic representation of the 'purists'' view of such traces as that of 'grammarians looking on a 'dialect'. The imperial theme recurs: such a view is like the contrast between empire and colony, between city and province - this last reference is preparation for a major theme that is presented in a later phase of the lecture. All this is now fleetly concentrated in the twin notions of the phantom limb of memory yearning to rejoin the central 'body', 'like those bamboo thighs of the god'. The last negative formulation shifts from Asian-Caribbean deity to Caribbean man, when Walcott re-uses from 'What the Twilight Says' the
observation of the nineteenth-century historian A.J. Froude that ‘there are no people’ in the West Indies ‘in the true sense of the word’. Walcott does not have to mention how the dragon’s-teeth of this remark were sowed in the fertile soil of Naipaul’s negativism. ‘No people,’ Walcott echoes ironically; ‘Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken.’ In turning this on its head by affirming that the Hindu play ‘was like a dialect, a branch of its original language, an abridgement of it, but not a distortion or even a reduction of its epic scale’, Walcott is reclaiming the terms of discourse, whose implications (transformed continuity of culture rather than its dogged preservation) he spins out later on.

What we encounter now is a kind of lyrical interlude or concentratedly poetic resting of breath before Walcott continues with a new aspect of the theme of fragmentation. Two ‘performances’, one human, the other from the natural world, are paralleled in Walcott’s juxtaposition of the iconic features of the drama he leaves and those of the flocks of ibises. The ‘scarlet ... boy archers’ and the ‘red flags’ are like the ‘arrowing flocks of scarlet ibises’. The birds land in the Caroni Swamp, turning an islet into ‘a flowering tree, an anchored immortelle’. The metaphoric implication, in terms of the lecture’s preoccupations, takes us back to the perpetual renewals of nature; there is the notion of ships at anchor among the islands of the Caribbean – a page earlier, the platform on which the play is performed is represented as a ‘raft’ in an ‘ocean of cane’, an image which is potentiated at a crucial moment later in the lecture. Finally, the red immortelle is not a gratuitous image, either – it is a natural icon of the Caribbean, like the pohutukawa tree in New Zealand; it drags with it the memory of its decorative use on the slave plantations; it is, like so many of the botanical terms upon which Walcott lovingly dwells in his poetry, of French origin; and its meaning encapsulates the everlastingness of memory beyond historical time. This is why Walcott can state that ‘the sigh of History meant nothing here’, when one is faced by the beauty of the landscape. From dialect, Walcott slips backward into the lexis of the pre-grammatical: the ‘sigh’ and the ‘groan’ of history dissolve in the ‘single gasp of gratitude’ that blends the visions of ibises and drama.

Walcott now rejects his first impulse to seek in the epic drama ‘evocations of a lost India’ – what the East Indians never knew cannot be ‘lost’, so there is no place in the Caribbean for nostalgia, for what he calls, in ‘The Muse of History’, ‘a yearning for ruins’ (p. 7). In the lecture, he confirms that ‘there are few ruins to sigh over’. In a 1990 interview with Luigi Sampietro, the immediate elements of discourse found in the Nobel lecture are concentrated in an alternative disposition – Walcott states that in the Caribbean ‘there are no visible ruins – no visible echoes of destruction. The emphasis is not on a repetition of history so much as on the beginning, daily, of elation – of pleasure and delight – which is supplied by the geography of the Caribbean’. Walcott sees the epic drama now as ‘celebrations of a real presence’, to which he can open himself – perhaps,
he muses, in a film ‘that would be a long-drawn sigh over Felicity’. For Walcott, the festivities of a multitude of ethnic groups constitute ‘all the fragmented languages of Trinidad’.

In an analogy drawn from archaeological restoration, Walcott sees the active spiritual engagement with these cultural traces as resembling the gathering and piecing together of a vase. In the white sealing scars that renew its symmetry resides more love and pain than in any regard for the original. The logic of the analogy, significantly, is that the pieced-together vase is not the restoration of, say, a Greek amphora: the restoration runs against such a historicizing attitude, and it is ‘our African and Asiatic fragments’ that are amalgamated into one artefact. Hence Walcott’s summarizing sentence: ‘Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent’. This relates to the conviction, expressed elsewhere, that the whole Caribbean Basin, including the archipelago with its islands fragmented into petty nationalisms, is held together by a totality of racial experience. Unspoken here, too, is Walcott’s conviction that ‘an island culture ... whether Greek or West Indian’, is bound to produce cultural ‘cross-fertilization’.

Via art, Walcott has moved thematically from popular culture back to language, and now to poetry itself, which is a ‘remaking’ of ‘fragmented memory’, and which happens to resemble his own poetic practice. The art of poetry is metaphorized as the assembling of the god Rama by the artisans of Felicity, ‘cane by cane, reed by weaving reed, line by plaited line’. This last punning construction on ‘line’ as rope and verse-line exemplifies a figure encountered throughout Walcott’s poetry, but especially in the epical Omeros: the interweaving of the technical diction of poetic craft with everyday action and experience. This technique becomes more densely present later in the lecture.

The poetic theme now both intensifies and expands. We must keep in mind that the discourse here is a plaiting or indissoluble weaving of two strands: the testimony of Walcott in his function as a poet for his people; and his people’s own restoration of their cultural fragments. In a baroque shift from the vase image, the past is presented as a marmoreal, sculpted statue, with the present as fresh dewdrops beading its forehead. Poetry ‘conjugates both tenses simultaneously’ and, in an image reminiscent of Seamus Heaney, excavates the ‘buried’ imperial language or diction of institutions, defying it through the dewdrop freshness of the individual dialects of the archipelago. The manifold connotations here include the metropolitan, ‘absent’ and literally monolithic essence of the frowning statue, and the interrelated multiplicity and fresh immediacy of dewdrops, islands, and dialects. Walcott’s sentences are simple, but the logic fiercely complex. The central utterance, harking back to the anchored immortelle and the rafts of cane, is that ‘poetry is an island that breaks away from the main’. This, too, is polysemous, punning on mainland and ocean, the is-
land fixed yet as free to move as a ship on the main. In the next paragraph, the original metropolitan language is re-cast as exhausted ‘fog trying to cross an ocean’ and dissolving in the process (a process of creative fragmentation). The merging of ship and sail and mist that runs through Walcott’s later poetry is thus echoed here. Verbally more subterranean because dispersed is a parallelism set up between making and remaking, fresh and refreshing; this moves Walcott now towards the notions of naming and renaming, in the conjoined senses of crafting poetry and of creating and ordering the epistemes of Caribbean existence.† As we have seen, renaming, because in the Caribbean it is an epistemological process of naming afresh or, for the poet, for the first, Adamic time, is an act that produces ‘elation’.

We are returned to the African slaves and indentured East Indians now; deprived of their original language, they gather ‘fragments of an old, epic vocabulary’, fashioning new metaphors, and accepting given place-names like Felicity, as did Crusoe and as does the poet, every morning of their working day. The Crusoe reference is, of course, a pivotal intertext of Walcott’s, and the notion of the morning of creativity has both broader and more mundanely autobiographical implications. The poetic urge is hinted at homologously and prosodically in the wit of Crusoe ‘assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity’; and other works by Walcott make it clear that when he says Crusoe, like the poet, is ‘even renaming himself’, what is involved is the assumption of the name of Friday, just as Caribbean man is an ennobled Caliban, not a Prospero.20 Walcott stresses the strength and vitality of ‘a huge tribal vocabulary’ which, in a continuation of the archaeology/Crusoe ideas, is retrieved from the ‘shards’ and from ‘this shipwreck of fragments’.

The whole diaspora, Middle Passage and all, is now concentrated by Walcott in the historyless ferment and mongrelized babel of Trinidad’s Port of Spain. Here, says Walcott, is the ‘writer’s heaven’; here, he says ironically, are A.J. Froude’s ‘non-people’. The whole central section of the lecture treats a topic which Walcott has touched on in his poetry, but has never focused on in his prose. It is prefaced with the ironical observation that ‘a culture, we all know, is made by its cities’.21 To wake in the sudden light of a Port of Spain dawn is to experience a ‘surprising peace’, but what disorients Walcott as his camera-eye scans the urban scene outside his window is the fact that the architecture is imitating the brutal aspirations of another, northern climate – imitating its power, even its air-conditioned coldness. The comparisons ironically adduced are the ‘colonial’ names of Columbus and Des Moines. The seriousness and seasonality of the north is contrasted, with mock contempt, to the unending postcard summer of the tropics. Like the hissing serpent voice of the worm in ‘A Far Cry from Africa’, Walcott has almost persuaded his audience that what he is arguing is the case. But Port of Spain’s ‘assertion of power’ can only be a gesture, for it is in the nature of the Caribbean to lack any
power save the power of art, as many comments of Walcott’s elsewhere attest. 22 What Walcott really believes is 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’ 23 – and it is the intercalation of Caribbean cities with their natural surroundings, and their essence of being ‘magnified market towns’, which delights Walcott as he expands his argument. The preceding argument of contemptuous comparison turns out, of course, to be a parody of Froude and, implicitly, of Naipaul. An analogy which uses the inadequate tools of formal classical prosody finds both Caribbean geography and music deficient in subtlety – the ‘two stresses’ and ‘incomplete meter’ of ‘hot and wet, sun and rain, light and shadow’. Walcott shrugs this off: ‘We cannot change contempt’.

Nobody wants the Caribbean cities to be cities, says Walcott. They are still much as they were in the prose of those who depicted them – and Walcott is magnanimous enough to start with Naipaul, in a brief list which ends with Aimé Césaire and St–John Perse, who were his old touchstones in ‘The Muse of History’. Walcott distances himself from the inorganicism of the city and freshens up the vegetative metaphor of the flowering of literature when he mentions his delight ‘in watching a literature ... bud and open, island by island, in the early morning of a culture’. 24 Note that Walcott overcomes fragmentation, and asserts a pan–Caribbean aesthetic, by seeing this as ‘one literature in several imperial languages, French, English, Spanish’; this also echoes his conviction, expressed elsewhere, that writers in the Caribbean are lucky to have the ‘language of the master’ and to recognize ‘the language’s essential duality’ in their fertilization of it ‘by the language of dialect’. 25

As though narrative time has passed in the course of his reflections, it is now ‘a heat-stoned afternoon’; transferring the notion of flowering now, Walcott looks out again at a backyard in Port of Spain, where a love vine spills over a fence, and there are palms and a mountain in the distance. The traveler reads this as lethargy, as torpor’, Walcott comments – Froude and Naipaul again. 26 If there is material and intellectual deprivation, argues Walcott, implicating the Crusoe theme again, a man must make a virtue of necessity – he must shape thought, must record it, must commemorate. And we are back to the making of the literary culture of the Caribbean. There follows a brilliantly sensuous evocation, in the style of a Renaissance philosopher perhaps, of the ideal Caribbean city. The ideal includes a wishful setting back to a nineteenth-century condition of horse-drawn traffic, and a triumph of racial and humane variety and intermix-ture. This, he says, ‘is how Athens may have been before it became a cultural echo’. Confirmed here is Walcott’s conviction, out of which grew the poem Omeros, of the Caribbean archipelago as a ‘New Aegean’. 27 Walcott has put this more forcefully elsewhere – part of the meaning of Omeros, he says, ‘is that the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean’; what we take to be bleached stones were really painted purple and gold, with
the bright and lurid taste of Puerto Ricans, so that the real Greece was very Caribbean, with ‘the same vigour and elation’. The ‘visible poetry of the Antilles’ resides in such things as the presence of the Caribbean Sea, and in what Walcott calls ‘survival’; if the beauty of Port of Spain’s buildings can be seen in its ‘baroque woodwork’, this is a survival. The Caroni Plain is evoked behind the city, and poetic figuration takes us back to the start of the lecture, with Indian prayer flags fluttering, and ibises flying by ‘like floating flags’. The poetry of the Caribbean is not in ‘postcard sadnesses’ – later on, Walcott cites Lévi–Strauss’s term tristes tropiques and applies it to the elegiac pathos of the outsider’s view, which is also termed the traveler’s ‘malaise’. In literature, this is the view of Froude, of Conrad, even of Graham Greene. The delicate engravings of the nineteenth century – the equivalents of our postcards – misunderstood the harsh light of the tropics ‘and the people on whom the light falls’, softening and ordering the landscape via the distorting lens of history. The real, horse-drawn nineteenth century dictates rhythmically much of the life of the Caribbean, says Walcott, as it does the West Indian novel. Compare ‘What the Twilight Says’: ‘the apparent conservatism of West Indian fiction ... is ... but a memory’ of the folk forms of an earlier epoch (p. 24).

The term ‘malaise’ echoes ‘What the Twilight Says’, where there is what Walcott calls the colonials’ ‘malarial enervation: that nothing could ever be built’ in the Caribbean (p. 4). In ‘The Muse of History’, the ‘malaise’ is there again, and defined as ‘the malaria of nostalgia’ (p. 18) and ‘an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture’ (p. 7). In the Nobel lecture, Walcott once again uses Froude as his foil for the unnamed Naipaul, as the source for the now so familiar notion ‘that since History is based on achievement, and since the history of the Antilles was so genetically corrupt ... a culture was inconceivable, and nothing could ever be created’ there. On the contrary: just as the Caribbean city ‘is satisfied with its own scale’, so Caribbean culture ‘is not evolving but already shaped’. Here is Walcott’s summative rejection of historical progressivism, and it’s good enough as a profession of unconditional acceptance – though his retort to Naipaul in a recent interview (‘Perhaps it should read that “Nothing was created by the British in the West Indies”’) is also food for thought.

Walcott now turns his gaze outward towards his immediate audience and the immediate occasion, and says: ‘Here, on the raft of this dais, there is the sound of the applauding surf: our landscape, our history, recognized, “at last”’. In his witty deconstruction of the dead metaphor of ‘waves of applause’ there are manifold implications and evocations. It is as though Walcott the castaway, the fortunate traveler, has rafted himself and his tiny island of St Lucia out of the Caribbean Sea into the lapping (or lapping-up) waters of the Old World audience. Stockholm has finally silenced Froude and Naipaul. There is the further implication that Walcott, standing on the dais, is in stasis and concentration, and the applauding public in motion. The passing traveler and the tourist, Walcott suggests,
cannot love a particular landscape; only he who stays there, 'in stasis and concentration', can do so. It is at this point, at the latest, that one will see why the lecture is so lyrical and buoyant. It is a declaration of love matching the world’s declaration of respect; like most declarations of love, it avoids intellection; its abstractions are only such as can be rendered tangible, sensuous; as in declarations of love, there is quiet conviction alternating with soaring elation, and an avoidance of banal factualities.

An homage to St-John Perse now follows. This white creole from Guadeloupe, states Walcott, ‘was the first Antillean to win this prize for poetry’. In the ‘ironic republic that is poetry’, he continues, borrowing a phrase from Joseph Brodsky, we cannot deny Perse any more than we can deny the African Aimé Césaire. Certain evocative images now herald their appearance: the freshness of Perse’s poetry is ‘the first breeze’ of sunrise, the sound of pages turning is the rustle of palm trees; later, to see cabbage palms rustling in the breeze is to imagine them ‘reciting Perse’. Art and nature form a perfect imaginative symbiosis, and the islands, Walcott claims, are at last ‘writing themselves’, rather than being written about by the likes of Froude. Walcott explodes now into a virtuoso redeployment of the major imagery and diction encountered in the lecture so far. The epic Hindu drama of Ramleela merges with Perse’s Anabase, an ‘imaginary epic’ with an Asian setting; the young archer fires his arrows across the flagged field among the exclamation points of Muslim minarets and the young Perse gathers his epic fragments ‘from the lances of the cane fields’ in Guadeloupe, and the ‘compact expedition’ of his epic begins to move to ‘the rustling march of cabbage palms in a Caribbean sunrise’. In an allusion to the poetic project of Omeros and an echo of the section ‘Archipelagoes’ from the poem called ‘Map of the New World’, the anonymous boy we choose to call Homer skips a pebble across the Aegean to generate the skipping lines of Greek epic. These artist-figures are all children, because it is only right that the young be at the sunrise of creation. And Walcott forces the renaming of the same images into ever-tightening series: ‘For every poet it is always morning in the world’; the writer exults to witness ‘the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn’. The sounds of leaves at sunrise are ‘the sounds of a fresh dialect’. Walcott has noted elsewhere, of Wallace Stevens composing poetry while he walked, that ‘the pace of strolling is iambic pentameter’, in the lecture, the ‘meter’ of a poet’s personal style is his life, and his body, Adamic and Crusoe-esque, itself responds to the Antillean presence ‘like a walking, a waking, island’.

What now follows looks like a brief digression, but it is held in place by the terms of discourse already employed (language, naming, words, meter, body). The natural ‘dialect’ of nature, this ‘fresh language’, is associated by Walcott with ‘a fresh people’; in a renewal of the dais-reference, Walcott ‘stand[s] here in their name’, conscious of the duty he owes them as their poetic voice. Now the human dialect is matched to the natural
dialect, as the ‘morning-stirred’ names of St Lucian trees and valleys are listed – ‘all songs and histories in themselves, pronounced not in French but in patois’. This celebration of the provincial over the metropolitan is then presented in the yet starker juxtaposition of a passage of classic English verse and a St Lucian folksong in French patois (superimposed West Indian metropolitanism in the school system; Black peasant substructure in the countryside); but reconciliation of the ‘two languages’ one hears on rising already resides in the shared metrical impulse. Walcott presents the ‘body’ or immediate presence of poetry without further comment at this point, four-fifths of the way through his address. There are intertextual resonances in the eight lines Walcott quotes from William Cowper’s ‘Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk’. Beneficiaries of a ‘colonial’ education, but with a post-colonial consciousness, will be aware that ‘I am monarch of all I survey’ expresses both Crusoe’s colonialis­ist claim to exclusivity and power and also his rejection of ‘this horrible place’ and its vacuity. There is thus an encoding here of Walcott’s ironically echoic defiance of Froude and Naipaul, particularly when one considers the prior presence in the lecture of Crusoe as primal namer (the school-room poetry scenario is refashioned, to a primal purpose, at the close of the talk), and the fact that the first four – ‘positive’ – lines from Cowper were quoted by Walcott long ago in his lecture ‘The Figure of Crusoe’ (p. 8) to illustrate the creative ego.

Note that these very different dawn-songs encode ‘histories’ – of individuals, mythically, not of the race. Once we understand this, and the way in which the load-bearing image of dawn/sunrise inherently militates against the retrospectivity of history, we can accept the otherwise unmediated deictic force of Walcott’s statement immediately following the patois love-song: ‘It is not that History is obliterated by this sunrise’. But history is once again under the control of the old metaphors drawn from the timelessness of nature: instead of the sigh of history, ‘the sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage’; the immortelle’s scarlet is the blood of the butchered Caribs; surf on sand ‘cannot erase the African memory’. The ‘lances of cane’ on the Plain of Caroni are the bars of a prison still trapping the ghosts of indentured Asians. What Walcott ‘reads’ here is ‘the grace of effort’, which makes the St Lucian woodcutter one with himself, the artisan-poet ‘from boyhood’. Cutting across this past, which Walcott can still read in the Antillean landscape, are the simplifications of contemporary touristic venality. The homologous mahogany of woodcutters’ faces (fragments of Africa) is mocked by the tourist’s ‘mahogany tan’. The metaphor of the raft is naturalized to the swimming-pool raft bearing cocktail drinks in the blue pool of the postcard Caribbean. But, Walcott warns, the memory of the sea is vast, and each of its islands an act of remembrance, ‘an effort of memory’ (again the intimation both of landscape as its own naming, and of the poet’s task of recollective/re-collective celebration).
The earlier image of dissolving fog over the archipelago is reworked now in terms of ‘amnesia’, another major theme of Walcott’s writing. The artistic imagination in the arc of Antillean islands is a rainbow or arc-en-ciel piercing the fog of cultural amnesia. In a 1977 interview, Walcott stresses the multitudinous impurity of the New World, the fact that it is ‘a broken arc’ that reaches from Africa to the Americas; ‘we only know half the arc’, he says, ‘and anything beyond that half arc has been torn from our memory’. Instead, the cultural sensibility ‘has been broken and re-created’. In the lecture, Walcott warns that this sensibility can be broken again. The memory of genocidal ‘decimation’ ‘is the blasted root of Antillean history’; a new decimation, one infers, can arise out of the susceptibility of these fragmented ‘island nations’ to the ‘benign blight’ of the descending ‘arc’ of tourism’s progress. Here the hotels are pungingly rendered as ‘white-winged’ birds spreading like a crust of guano across the landscape, in contrast to the naturally fluid ‘brown river’ of houses clustering on the volcanic hills outside the St Lucian town of Soufrière. Walcott points out twice in succession that his own prose in the Nobel lecture is itself threatening his cherished, backward, unimportant landscapes, corrupting them through tourism ‘into significance’. In an echo of the exclamation-marks of minarets, Walcott evokes ‘the hanging question of some fisherman’s smoke’ at the end of a solitary beach, and the question suspended is: will this all disappear? The fishermen, in a re-working of the topos of ‘mahogany’ skin, are trees organically rooted in their environment, the bark of their skin ‘filmed with sweat’. The alternative to this is the ‘rootless trees’ of suited entrepreneurs, selling out the islands.

There is truth in the painful and simple joy aroused by the sight of African children in St Lucia and East Indian children at the epic drama of Felicity. It is not innocence, but this truth and the truth of literature and the imagination, that Walcott prays will be cherished and preserved, like the blessed obscurity of his island of birth. And, in a daring feat which might be taken for conceit but shouldn’t, Walcott’s closing sentence returns us to the childhood beginnings of literary creativity: if before we had the boy Homer in the Aegean archipelago, with his pebble-skipping lines of epic poetry, now we have, alongside the delight of the arrow-flying child at Felicity, ‘another life’: that of Walcott’s schoolboy self in the Caribbean archipelago, the pages of his exercise book framing stanzas ‘that might contain the light of the hills’.

The lecture is an exhilarating display of elated creativity – a poem in the surface garb of prose. The technique has the lightness and translucency of a mature master, who has been engaged in assembling and shuffling and transforming the lyric fragments of his deepest beliefs, raising the epic, cyclical and mythic impulse of his people above the distorting linearity of the colonialist myth of history. Which returns us to the title. It is perhaps noteworthy that Walcott has only once before, in ‘The Muse of History’ (p. 14), used the term ‘Antillean’, and there he was declaring his kinship
with Césaire. We might dwell on the thought that the word ‘Antilles’ occurs some 25 times in the Nobel lecture. It would of course be logical in a framework embracing the French literature of the Caribbean for Walcott to use the Romance designation. In referring to the ‘New Aegean’ in ‘The Muse of History’, Walcott calls the Caribbean of the poets ‘the Isles of the Blest, the Fortunate Isles, ... the remote Bermudas, ... Prospero’s isle, ... Crusoe’s Juan Fernández, ... Cythera’ (p. 6), and not ‘the Antilles’. But recall that the chief exemplar of the Nobel lecture is an East Indian ceremony, on a plain whose name, originally ‘Caroni’, is Amerindian. The post-Conquest, Columbian term ‘West Indies’ has been carefully side-stepped by Walcott, because it encodes the linear errancy of history. ‘Antilles’, by contrast, can be traced back beyond the legendary names of the Renaissance to Antiquity, where ‘Antilia’ was first a semi-mythical land somewhere west of Europe, was then fragmented on some maps into an archipelago, and was finally applied by the Spanish to the new-‘found’ islands as ‘las Antillas’. So the very choice of the term by Walcott is a celebration both of insular fragmentation and of a form of creative myth which, unlike the term ‘West Indies’, has the ring of a new reality about it.

NOTES


2. His articulation of distrust for prosaic utterance is enlisted as a kind of topos, especially within the context of public address, to underscore the more truthful, more essential ‘inarticulacy’ or ‘impossibility of communication’ of his true métier, which is poetry. See, for example, his comment on prose as ‘the most immoral form of feeling’ in ‘The Figure of Crusoe: On the theme of isolation in West Indian writing’ (unpublished typescript lecture delivered at the St Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies, Trinidad, in 1965), p. 2; or prose as ‘the very opposite of the perpetual ignorance of poetry’, in ‘Caligula’s Horse’, opening address delivered at the Eighth Conference on West Indian Literature, Mona campus, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, May 1988, in After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing, ed. Stephen Slemon & Helen Tiffin (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1989), p. 138. For similar remarks, see also ‘“An Object Beyond One’s Own Life”’, interview conducted by Luigi Sampietro in 1990, in Caribana 2 (1991), p. 28.


5. Walcott’s constructive denial of the notion of linear history as applicable to the West Indies is elaborated in ‘The Muse of History’ and is interwoven with an explicit, deflationary analysis of Naipaul’s concept of the ‘mimic men’ in ‘The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?’, a 1973 address to the University of Miami American Assembly on the United States and the Caribbean (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs 16.1, February 1974, pp. 3-13).

6. At its simplest, the term is applied to the spontaneous individuality of West Indian dancing, whose ‘elation is almost anarchic’ (‘Patterns to Forget’ in the Trinidad Guardian, 22 June 1966, p. 5) and West Indian stage acting: ‘there is a great elation in it, even a tragic joy’ (‘Walcott Plans “Instant Theatre”’ in the Trinidad Guardian, 20 August 1969, p. 8) and the young company of another West Indian director ‘performs with refreshing elation’ (‘Mixing the Dance and Drama’ in the Trinidad Guardian, 6 December 1972, p. 5). The actors in Walcott’s Trinidad Theatre Workshop are ‘drunk on elation’ (‘What the Twilight Says: An Overture’, in Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970, pp. 3-40), p. 36. Walcott has a vision of his actors striding up a windy ridge in St Lucia, ‘an elate company’ (‘Twilight’, p. 36). Unlike the poets, West Indian novelists have ‘an elation in composing’ (‘Walcott on Walcott’, interview conducted by Dennis Scott, in Caribbean Quarterly XIV, 1-2, March-June 1968, p. 80). In Soyinka’s dramatic prose, too, there is ‘a daring and elation that is part of a new country’s youth’ (‘Soyinka – A Poet Not Content with Genius’ in the Sunday Guardian, 12 January 1969, p. 13). In ‘Twilight’ the schoolboy Walcott experiences ‘the literatures of Empires’ and the ‘patois of the street’ with the same ‘elation of discovery’ (p. 4; this phrase, with its connection to the Caribbean child’s response to the Latin, Greek and British classics, occurs again at the close of ‘Meanings’ in Savacou: A Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement 2, 1970, p. 51). As a boy, he is ‘elated’ by his discovery of George Campbell and the recognition that the poet was mentioning things Walcott knew (‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, New York, 1977, in Contemporary Literature XX, 3, Summer, 1979, p. 283); at nineteen, he is ‘an elate, exuberant poet’ (‘Twilight’, p. 11), feeling ‘great elation and release’ when reading Auden and Eliot (‘The Art of Poetry XXXVII’, p. 207). Writing of Ti-Jean and His Brothers, he recalls ‘the elation and innocence of its self-creation’ (‘Derek’s Most West Indian Play’ in Sunday Guardian Magazine, 21 June 1970, p. 7).


8. ‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 289.

9. ‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 283. See also ‘The Art of Poetry XXXVII’: ‘My generation of West Indian writers has felt such a powerful elation at having the privilege of writing about places and people for the first time ... there was no burden, no excess of literature in our heads. It was all new’ (p. 211). Metatextually, Walcott can respond to what he senses is the unaccustomed – ‘new’ – tone of celebration in Naipaul’s The Enigma of Arrival, before his ‘elation and gratitude’ shrivel as Naipaul reverts to his old negativity (‘The Garden Path’, p. 28).


12. 'Twilight', p. 18. This remark, from Froude's The English in the West Indies, or The Bow of Ulysses (1888), forms part of the epigraph to the poem 'Air' in The Gulf and Other Poems (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 36. In 'Air', Walcott deflects the notion 'There is too much nothing here' away from human cultural vacuum towards the pre-colonial, all-engulfing presence of the rain forest.

13. 'The epic-minded poet ... finds no ruins' ('The Muse of History', p. 8); a conviction Walcott has repeatedly stated elsewhere, in his poetry, certainly – even in 'Ruins of a Great House' – and in the prose: the slave-kings Dessalines and Christophe of Haiti 'were our only noble ruins', Christophe's Citadel at La Ferrière the 'one noble ruin in the archipelago' ('Twilight', p. 14).


15. Walcott has in recent years become increasingly involved in the alternative narrativity and non-linear potentialities of film, particularly as a script-writer. Later in the lecture, he returns to the notion of the filmic in a mention of his eye panning the cityscape of Port of Spain. And the capturing of visual essences, which is characteristic of the lecture's structural discourse, is summarized by Walcott at the close in the term 'epiphany'. A cultural subtext which Walcott implicitly and ironically steers against in his references to film is that of the tropical travelogue (which surfaces later in adversions to the mis-representationalism of picture postcards and tourism).

16. 'An Interview with Derek Walcott' by Edward Hirsch, pp. 280-81.

17. 'Meanings', p. 49.

18. Cf 'The Art of Poetry xxxvii': 'little unjoined shapes, little fragments', which are welded together (pp. 229-30).

19. On the process of 'naming something in its own presence', see 'We Are Still Being Betrayed', p. 14. Excitement came from the things around the young Walcott 'being named by people in a new language, even if that language was being called creole, or vulgar, or patois, or a dialect, or whatever' ('An Interview with Derek Walcott' by Edward Hirsch, p. 287). Among several studies of the topos of 'naming' in Walcott's poetry, see especially Michel Fabre, "'Adam's Task of Giving Things Their Names': The Poetry of Derek Walcott', New Letters 41 (Fall 1974), pp. 91-107, and Patricia Ismond, 'Naming and Homecoming: Walcott's Poetry Since Another Life', ACLALS Bulletin Series VII, 2 (1985), pp. 27-38.

20. See 'The Muse of History' for the rejection of the noble savage myth and its replacement by Adamic re-creation, whether by Crusoe or by Friday (p. 5), and, of course, 'The Figure of Crusoe', passim. See 'The Art of Poetry xxxvii' for Walcott's notion that it is actually Friday who is civilizing Crusoe (pp. 213-14).

21. What the Twilight Says' opens with a bitter description of how the light of a tropical dusk ennobles the poverty of ramshackle cities, which are plunged back into into pastoralism at night; the 'true cities' outside the Caribbean, Walcott continues ironically, are illuminated at night by their artificiality (p. 3). In the same essay, the false mindset is mentioned whereby the Caribbean city, neither 'metropolitan' nor possessing 'power', hardly counts as a 'true' city (p. 27); at the close of the essay, alone the artist can be commended for envisaging the true city as being devoted to art, not to power or money (p. 40). In 'The Muse of History', the false nostalgia of existentialism, Walcott states, is the kind of illusory freedom of philosophy engendered by cities (p. 6); and, towards the close: the Caribbean peasant cannot afford the revolutionary rhetoric born of the city (p. 21). An orientation towards the city is even made responsible for the failure of contem-
porary American poets to see that song (as ‘the collective memory of the whole race’) lies at the heart of poetry (‘Conversation with Derek Walcott’ conducted in 1975 by Robert D. Hamner, in World Literature Written in English 16.2, November 1977, pp. 417-18). And: people who come from continental cities to the Caribbean ‘go through the process of being recultured’ to an absence of clock-time (‘The Art of Poetry xxxvii’, p. 214).

22. There is ‘no economic power, there is no political power. Art is lasting. It will out-last these things’ (‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 284).

23. ‘Interview’ with Ned Thomas, p. 46.

24. There are intertexts for this last metaphor, relating, for example, to the Adamic experience, far from urban Kingston, of ‘walking on a beach that is really deserted on an early morning’; ‘you can’t avoid the feeling that this is a new world’ (‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 283). And, more appositely: because of the exhilarating natural beauty of the Caribbean, ‘one can always think of European poetry as a twilight, and Caribbean literature as a morning – as opposite times of the day’ (‘“An Object Beyond One’s Own Life”’, p. 1).


27. See ‘Twilight’, p. 16, and ‘The Muse of History’, p. 6; cf also ‘Meanings’, p. 49.


29. The Art of Poetry xxxvii, p. 213.


31. ‘Conversation with Derek Walcott’ by Robert D. Hamner, p. 418.

32. The poem ‘The Sea is History’ explicitly refutes the claim that the Caribbean has no history and ‘tribal memory’ by celebrating the sea’s epic transformations of ‘natural’ history (The Star-Apple Kingdom; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979, pp. 25-28).
