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Abstract
At the 1992 ACLALS conference in Jamaica, the distinguished Sri Lankan critic, Jasmine Gooneratne, quoted from Walcott's 'A Far Cry from Africa', which she called one of the most moving poems of the century. The next year, a republished essay by the English Puerto Rican critic, Gerald Guinness, described the 'entire poem as a tissue of insincerities'.1 Guinness's adverse judgement was anticipated in 1982 by Helen Vendler in her review of The Fortunate Traveller, where she referred to 'A Far Cry from Africa' as 'not ... a poem, but rather an essay in pentameters'.2 How can judgements diverge so far? Can the divergence tell us something about Walcott's poetry and, perhaps, 'post-colonial' poetry in general? I shall seek an answer to these questions by examining the foundations for the adverse judgements.

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At the 1992 ACLALS conference in Jamaica, the distinguished Sri Lankan critic, Jasmine Gooneratne, quoted from Walcott's 'A Far Cry from Africa', which she called one of the most moving poems of the century. The next year, a republished essay by the English Puerto Rican critic, Gerald Guinness, described the 'entire poem as a tissue of insincerities'.

Guinness's adverse judgement was anticipated in 1982 by Helen Vendler in her review of The Fortunate Traveller, where she referred to 'A Far Cry from Africa' as 'not ... a poem, but rather an essay in pentameters'.

How can judgements diverge so far? Can the divergence tell us something about Walcott's poetry and, perhaps, 'post-colonial' poetry in general? I shall seek an answer to these questions by examining the foundations for the adverse judgements.

Guinness's is based on Leavisean criteria: 'What makes "A Far Cry from Africa" such an unlikeable poem is the feeling it gives of having been concocted from literature rather than of having issued from lived experience.' This is incautiously simple in its appeal to experience, since he can of course only justify his conclusion by analysing the poem as literature - something Helen Vendler never loses sight of.

Her case is consequently much more subtly and challengingly argued. She reverses Guinness's conclusion, immediately granting that in Walcott's early (and later) poetry 'the emotional attitudes ... were authentic'. This opening concession of the validity of Walcott's subject matter, the truth of his experience, which is that of 'the black colonial predicament' in all its anguish, enables her to acknowledge a great deal of Walcott - his humanity, his social range, the historical representativeness of his experience - all the things that summon a response of recognition. In these respects, her review is a fine and understanding appreciation: 'He will remain for this century one of its most candid narrators of the complicated and even desperate destiny of the man of great sensibility and talent born in a small colonial outpost, educated far beyond the standard of his countrymen, and pitched - by sensibility, talent, and education - into an isolation that deepens with every word he writes.'

For Helen Vendler all that, however, is not enough. It constitutes the social experience that might motivate an essay, or contribute to the realist texture of a novel, but, however moving and significant in itself, such experience does not make a poem. A poem may indeed be made out of historical experience, but it is made into something else which may even be
said, at least in some cases, to transcend the experience from which it is made. Walcott himself accomplishes this feat. After a fine appreciation of 'The Hotel Normandie Pool', Helen Vendler ends her review with an eloquent demonstration that the transcendence of painful historical experience is precisely Walcott's remarkable achievement in the last poem of The Fortunate Traveller, 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace'. Here she shows us 'the lyric Walcott who silences commentary'. Has any of Walcott's admirers written better of him?6

However, the weight of the review lies not on those two achievements, but on the more general failure, and here we return to Gerald Guinness. His analysis of 'A Far Cry from Africa' seeks to show that it is vitiated by over-ambitious emulation of literary models. In this he concurs with Helen Vendler's main reproach, that the expression is 'shallowly and melodramatically phrased', because the phrasing is not Walcott's but Yeats's. Indeed, she opens her review with the words: 'Derek Walcott is a poet, now over fifty, whose voice was for a long time a derivative one'. Given such a beginning, one reads on expecting a moment when the critic pronounces that now, at last, the true voice has been found. The pronouncement never comes. Rather, the opening charge is reiterated. Even in the patois poems, 'the baleful influence of Yeats suddenly overshadows the patois speaker, and the song ends on an unlikely "literary" note'. That is a comment on a poem from Walcott's 1962 volume In a Green Night. The review continues: 'Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Pound, Eliot, and Auden followed Yeats in Walcott's ventriloquism.'7 Walcott is reduced to a dummy sitting on the knees of the canonical masters, mindlessly repeating another's words. The overall judgement is that Walcott is not a great poet, and never will be, because he cannot settle on a voice. As late as the volume under review: 'He is still, even as a fully developed writer, peculiarly at the mercy of influence, this time the influence of Robert Lowell.'8

Now if this is true, and the argument is formidably searching, then Walcott's case would indeed be peculiar. We would not be dealing with a minor poet who occasionally hits the top of his form and lodges a handful of poems in the canon. We would be looking at someone capable of achieving complete artistry in two poems in a collection and as completely missing it in all the other poems.9 In the course of acknowledging the social and historical matrix of 'the black colonial predicament', Helen Vendler indicates the factors of emulation, mimicry and over-compensation that might make this happen. She cites Walcott's own awareness of these traps, which one could summarize as putting on the style. And, following her arguments, it could be that the social response of recognition has misled many of us, including Jasmine Gooneratne, into thinking we are responding to a poem when in fact we are merely looking in the mirror; and the same self-deception may be yielded to by the poet.

It seems to me, however, that while such social factors might satisfactorily explain a poet who wrote badly, the nature of the case precludes the possibility that such a poet might from time to time write like a master. By
Helen Vendler’s own account, to which I largely subscribe, the gulf fixed between sociology and poetry is absolute and bad poets are simply incapable of deviating into mastery. There must be some other factor at work to explain the extreme divergence of judgements and I suggest that this is the concept of the poet’s voice with which Helen Vendler, like most of us, operates.

One is apt to use the metaphor of voice quite automatically about any contemporary poet as they make themselves heard. The idea perhaps becomes more questionable when the poet under discussion is thought of as finding a voice not just for himself but for a whole people or nation, and that is frequently the case of poets and other writers in the field of Commonwealth or post-colonial literature. Think of Yeats, think of Yeats advising Synge to go to Aran and give an unknown people a voice, think of Raja Rao in India, and so on.

But is this commonplace of critical language trustworthy? It is in fact a concept with a history, and revisiting that history may help to clarify the issues. The idea that a poet has and must have a uniquely individual voice has been a commonplace only since Coleridge formulated it as a principle when arguing against contemporary reviewers for the excellence of Wordsworth. It is therefore worth examining the foundations of the idea as he first deploys it.

Coleridge mounts his argument in Chapter XX of *Biographia Literaria*. In this chapter he returns to the specific characteristics of Wordsworth’s actual poetic practice, after several chapters in which he has been arguing against Wordsworth’s theory as expressed in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*. Against Wordsworth’s unguardedly overstated assertion that poetry should be written in the actual language of men, Coleridge points out that it is precisely the formal conventions of poetry which differentiate it both from speech and written prose. True, there is a common or plain style to which all poets have equal access, which Coleridge traces back to the sixteenth century, but that is not to be confused with actual speech, though it may be related to it. These clarifications are acute and sound. Coleridge then turns to what is unique to Wordsworth. Paradoxically, given Wordsworth’s theoretic espousal of common speech, Coleridge finds his actual diction, ‘next to that of Shakespeare and Milton ... of all others the most *individualized* and characteristic’. Coleridge pronounces it as a principle that someone already familiar with Shakespeare, confronted by a passage never seen before, will be able to identify it as by the same author.

Let me pause to question this. If the works of Shakespeare a reader knew were only those between, say, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet*, I wonder whether that reader would be able to identify a passage from *Macbeth* or *Antony and Cleopatra* as written by the same hand. The controversies over works or parts of works sometimes attributed to Shakespeare suggests to me that his identity is by no means that certain. Keats in fact singled out lack of identity as Shakespeare’s distinguishing feature, and generalized it for all poets in his theory of negative capability.
Whatever his merits, at least Walcott shares with Shakespeare the feature of being both a poet and a dramatist.

After Coleridge has made this claim for an organic unity in the whole of Shakespeare's oeuvre, he goes on to make the same claim for Wordsworth: 'Who, having been previously acquainted with any considerable portion of Mr Wordsworth's publications, and having studied them with a full feeling of the author's genius, would not at once claim as Wordsworthian the little poem on the rainbow?' A certain style then becomes, as it were, Wordsworth's property, his signature. Consequently, 'From Mr Wordsworth's more elevated compositions ... it would be difficult ... to select instances of a diction ..., of a style which cannot be imitated, without its being at once recognised as originating in Mr Wordsworth.' It follows from this that if the style is the man, then the poem is virtually the author. The act of reading becomes synonymous with listening to someone's personal voice, to a recognizable because stable identity.

This way of reading can thus be historically located as beginning with Romanticism. It would not occur to an Elizabethan commentator that the style of a poem was individualized. He might comment that Mr Shakespeare had a sweet or sugared style, but that merely praised his success in writing in that style, and there would be nothing to prevent him from adopting a rugged or low style in another piece of writing – as Shakespeare in fact does. Coleridge seems aware of the novelty of his idea, for the word 'individualized' is italicized. According to the OED, the earliest use of the word in this sense applied to literature is in 1805: 'The peculiarities which individualize and distinguish the humour of Addison.' Coleridge himself is quoted in 1834 writing that 'Life may be defined as "tendency to individualize"'. The origins of the word are in fact in theology, describing an attribute of God, his indivisibility. Now we find that attribute attached to a human being and manifested in his works, surely an instance of the natural supernaturalism analysed by M.H. Abrams. Interestingly, Helen Vendler objects to one of the poems in The Fortunate Traveller because its various features 'taken all together do not resemble a soul in act'.

Now consider what happens to Coleridge's new principle for reading and critical judgement when it is applied to the following:

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table, and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham ... Between these two rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs ... In the centre of the table stood, as sentries to a fruit-stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed piano a huge yellow dish lay in waiting, and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms.
Would one not take this for Dickens? In fact it is Joyce, discreetly imitating Dickens in order to create the kind of communal and festive atmosphere he wants for the Misses Corkorans’ Christmas party in his masterpiece of a short story, ‘The Dead’. Joyce, like Shakespeare, is capable of adopting a variety of styles, and not just in the flamboyant experimentalism of Ulysses.

So either side of Coleridge’s critical principle one can talk of two major periods of literature in English, the Renaissance and Modernism, where it seems either not to apply or implicitly to be denied. It would detain me too long to investigate the complex of relations between liberal individualism and patriotic solidarity during the imperial wars against France which I believe lie behind Coleridge’s new critical principle. Having mentioned Wordsworth and Joyce, let me turn to Walcott’s own autobiographical poem, *Another Life*. This is where he undertakes his most sustained examination of his own identity, conscious of the great precedents of Wordsworth’s *Prelude: the Growth of a Poet’s Mind* and its antitype, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. What difference does it make to such a project if one is, as Helen Vendler says, of ‘mixed blood’ and colonial?

*Another Life* is divided into four books, and the first is titled ‘The Divided Child’. The story is a familiar one. It recapitulates as an inner, psychological drama several stages in the broader public history of colonization, decolonization and independence. The symptoms are surveyed in Fanon’s classic analysis of the psychology of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*. For instance, Walcott describes how, as an ambitious child, he scorned Caribbean flora in comparison with the literary flora of England. This is what Australians call the “cultural cringe” and the stereotypical text inducing the cringe is Wordsworth’s ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’ – the daffodils syndrome, repeatedly played out around the colonies. So that is one episode.

But conforming to metropolitan tastes is insufficient camouflage, because Walcott knows his skin betrays him as non-metropolitan, even in the West Indies. V.S. Naipaul has some devastating pages on the nice gradations of colour prejudice in the Caribbean in *The Middle Passage*. The same prejudice in favour of the lightest possible shade of skin is rife in India, not to mention China, Russia, Europe and America – indeed, where not, save Africa? Tormented by this feeling of being trapped by his skin colour in an identity he wants to escape, the child Walcott prays nightly to the moon in his window to make him whiter. So that is a second episode, which one might call the cosmetic solution.

That in turn is displaced by a third episode when he happens to hear a reading from the poems of the Jamaican poet, George Campbell, a writer of the 1940s who early asserted the validity of black identity. So here we have the episode of Black is Beautiful or Black Power, associated with the Harlem Renaissance or with Steve Biko in South Africa. It is equivalent to the assertions of national cultural identity in national independence movements, such as that led, culturally, by Yeats.

But even as this apparently liberating perspective opens out before him,
Walcott sees that so consoling a solution cannot be his:

And from a new book,
bound in sea-green linen, whose lines
matched the exhilaration which their reader,
rowing the air around him now, conveyed,
another life it seemed would start again,
while past the droning, tonsured head
the white face
of a dead child stared from its window-frame.20

The dead child is the other half of Walcott’s mixed blood, his father’s half.
That pins the problem. To assert any simplistic idea of cultural identity
based on blackness would be tantamount to infanticide and self-murder. So
here the traumas of racialism impel Walcott beyond the issues of cultural
identity that Joyce explores through Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait*. The issues
are similar, but cruelly intensified by colour, its illusion of definition, its
tendentious polarization. And there can be no escape by physical exile or
emigration to Paris when you carry your skin with you. Thus the social
issues of themselves impel Walcott to exhaust the sociological. Helen
Vendler’s question is: does he then take the step beyond into poetry?

Her criticism at least concedes Walcott the virtue of testifying honestly to
these dilemmas, but the only solution to them she appears to envisage is
that of a unified identity with a single voice. It is precisely Walcott’s refusal
of this which I see as his great strength, both humanistically and socially
speaking, and, most crucially to the present argument, poetically. Walcott’s
genius is compounded not only of a tenacious honesty that will not
compromise and consensualize the contradictions he experiences, but also of
an astonishing and inspiring resourcefulness in turning them to advantage.
The poems are where this happens.

On the one hand he has done as much as any poet at the dawn of a
national movement to give his people an entrance onto the stage of world
literature, most obviously in his dramas. As he says in ‘What the Twilight
Says’: ‘What would deliver him from servitude was the forging of a
language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of
revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its
own mode of inflection.’21 This is comparable with the Adamic programme
of the young Dedalus, promising to forge the uncreated conscience of his
race. It was the mission of American literature in the nineteenth century,
notably in Whitman and Melville. Hence, in chapter 8 of *Another Life*,
Walcott too, together with his painter companion, Gregorias, takes the
national artist’s patriotic pledge:

But drunkenly, or secretly, we swore
disciples of that astigmatic saint,
that we would never leave the island
until we had put down, in paint, in words,
as palmists learn the network of a hand,
all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines,
every neglected, self-pitying inlet
muttering in brackish dialect, the ropes of mangroves
from which old soldier crabs slipped
surrendering to slush,
each ochre track seeking some hilltop and
losing itself in an unfinished phrase,
under sand shipyards where the burnt-out palms
inverted the design of unrigged schooners,
entering forests, boiling with life,
goyave, corrosol, bois-canot, sapotille.\textsuperscript{22}

But look what happens to the pledge. Like the ochre tracks seeking the hilltops, it is part of an unfinished sentence. Things run down as much as they rise up. The landscape is by no means idealized. When the naming comes it is in French patois, remaining itself, as it were outside the poem and the young men’s project.

So for all his frequent and lavish evocations of the St Lucian landscape, Walcott performs the evocations from outside. The Adamic naming is done at a certain distance which distinguishes him from the nineteenth-century Americans. Like Joyce writing about Dublin in Trieste, Paris and Zurich, Walcott has written about and for St Lucia while actually working with the theatre company he founded in Trinidad, or, later, lecturing in Boston. And yet he has also kept the oath never to leave the island until he has recorded its every feature, for the promise is honoured where it matters, in the writing. The difference is that it is an identity conferred and seen from outside, not with the patriotic solidarity of the insider.

Hence he has felt equally free, on the other hand, to give voice to the impulses of his British inheritance. As a schoolboy he identifies with Gordon of Khartoum, enlists in the Fighting Fifth, shares in the solidarity of ‘us’ against ‘them’: ‘Tranced at my desk,/ groggy with dates, I leant/ across my musket. Redcoat ruminant’.\textsuperscript{23} Elsewhere, in ‘Laventille’ for example, he speaks with the bitterness of a descendant of slaves, one of history’s victims.

In giving voice to such contradictory ideals and feelings he exercises the franchise and privilege of the dramatist and lyricist. He is true to the feelings of the situation and moment, uninhibited by considerations of liberal propriety, political correctness, ethnic solidarity or rational consistency. The language of his plays ranges from creole to standard English, the parts are written for blacks and whites, peasants and bourgeois.

It is thus evident from his writing that Walcott precisely does not have a secure sense of identity, save as poet. How could he? And he’s not the only one. The population of the Caribbean is founded on genocide and built up by waves of forced and voluntary immigrations from various parts of the globe. The islands speak French, Spanish, English and Portuguese. What place could Coleridge’s notion of an organically unitary identity have in the Caribbean? When social identity itself becomes problematic, then so must a literary principle founded upon it. This is not to deny identity to Caribbean
writers but simply to recognize that the nature of identity and its voice will sound differently from that arising on the foundations of historically different societies.

Walcott himself is acutely aware of these issues, meditating on the self in 'Crusoe's Island' (The Castaway, 1965) and on cultural derivativeness in 'Crusoe's Journal' (The Gulf, 1970), where he describes his people as 'good Fridays who recite His praise,/ parroting our master's/ style and voice'. He sees himself and his ambitious contemporaries as 'solemn Afro-Greeks eager for grades' and in Another Life he is a houseboy stealing books from the mansion of his masters. In an interview with Denis Scott in 1968 Walcott made his position clear: 'I will always remain, as long as I write in the West Indies I will always be a visible imitator'; and in the West Indies he has in effect remained.

How does all this bear on the vexed question of literary influence? To address this, let me turn to the particulars of the influence of Robert Lowell, whose voice is alleged to overwhelm Walcott's in The Fortunate Traveller.

Walcott has arranged the volume so as to compose a triptych with a central panel of eighteen poems under the heading SOUTH, with two shorter panels headed NORTH on either side of it, the last composed, like the volume, of three units; the middle one of these is the title poem of the whole collection and it is given an epigraph from Revelation. This allusion picks up and extends more muted allusions in the poem that stands at the threshold of the collection, 'Old New England', a poem Helen Vendler specifically cites as overwhelmed by Lowell. Here it is:

Old New England

A white church spire whistles into space like a swordfish, a rocket pierces heaven as the thawed springs in icy chevrons race down hillsides and Old Glories flail the crosses of green farm boys back from 'Nam. Seasons are measured still by the same span of the veined leaf and the veined body whenever the spring wind startles an uproar of marching oaks with memories of a war that peeled whole counties from the calendar.

The hillside is still wounded by the spire of the white meetinghouse, the Indian trail trickles down it like the brown blood of the whale in rowanberries bubbling like the spoor on logs burnt black as Bibles by hellfire. The war whoop is coiled tight in the white owl, stone-feathered icon of the Indian soul, and railway lines are arrowing to the far mountainwide absence of the Iroquois.
Spring lances wood and wound, and a spring runs
down tilted birch floors with their splintered suns
of beads and mirrors – broken promises
that helped make this Republic what it is.

The crest of our conviction grows as loud
as the spring oaks, rooted and reassured
that God is meek but keeps a whistling sword;
His harpoon is the white lance of the church,
His wandering mind a trail folded in birch,
His rage the vats that boiled the melted beast
when the black clippers brought (knotting each shroud
round the crosstrees) our sons back from the East.27

The allusion is to Revelation XIX 19-20, apt to the radical Protestantism of
New England tradition, a tradition that ran strong in the anti-slavery
movement and whose apocalyptic language sustains the Battle Hymn of the
Republic, written during the Civil War. This brings the relation with Lowell
into a particular focus, for he too draws on this language, for example in his
early poem 'Where the Rainbow Ends'. But Walcott, a descendant of slaves
as well as of the liberators of slaves, hears and deploys the language
differently from Lowell. In this threshold poem he deliberately modulates
into the collective pronoun 'our', exercising his dual birthright, but it is an
'our' undermined by ambivalences tonally very different from Lowell's
ingenres, even at their most self-lacerating; indeed, it almost conveys the
opposite sense: 'your'. Compare the way Lowell modulates from 'Her
farmer/ is first selectman in our village', at the beginning of 'Skunk Hour', to
'I stand on top/ of our back steps' at the end of the poem, a movement
which maintains, however threatened, a community, and uses it to assert a
shared disgust.28 Or compare the value of a word like 'old' in 'Old New
England' with the value of 'old' in 'For the Union Dead':

On a thousand small town New England greens,
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion.29

The difference is between someone writing from within a tradition, however
beleaguered, and someone who remains outside even as he enters it, the
difference between the native and the traveller. Consequently, although
Walcott adopts some of Lowell's actual language and addresses some of his
concerns, there is no ventriloquism, he never speaks with Lowell's voice.
There is no laconic breaking of register to administer a shock to the
sensibility by understatement, there is no deliberate deployment of
colloquialisms against expected decorum, no calculated staking of the
personal voice in default of a public language that has been betrayed, no
personal protest or authoritative indignation.

This is because Walcott enters on any subject by a process of division,
cleaving its apparent unity by his own double attitude as heir to both agent
and patient, doer and sufferer. He cannot appeal indignantly to tradition, for that would be to continue the action and reaction of history, and his double consciousness is post-historical, as he has abundantly emphasised in his essay 'The Muse of History'. So, whereas Lowell musters the past in order to throw it into action with present urgency in current history, however wearily, Walcott’s New England landscape is a mythic one, existing in several times at once. The black clippers that bring home the dead from Vietnam are also Melville’s whalers and the landscape to which they return is haunted by ‘the mountainwide absence of the Iroquois’, whose trail, abruptly cut off in history, continues to be followed in myth. The language on which Lowell drew is prised loose from its Bostonian and New England habitat and is thereby deprived of that particular authority, while at the same time acquiring a new scope. Walcott introduces his kind of space, his kind of time into it, making the Revelation again what it once was, a prophecy of the end of history.

British and American critics may well mistake deliberate strategy for helpless mimicry because they are still not used to seeing this kind of relationship between poets writing in English. British and American critics and indeed poets still write and think from inside, not outside. Ben Jonson can lift passages from the Roman historians, as can Pope, and the fact that they bring their importations across the frontier of a foreign language enables us to accept them as enrichers of the native tradition. The fact that there is no frontier of language to cross in Walcott’s case is deceptive. A precedent for what Walcott is doing can be found in modern American literature and, once again, in Anglo-Irish. It was Eliot’s Americanness that enabled him to translate Tennyson as well as Dante into a current English, and thereby, incidentally, seem closer to the author of De Volgare Eloquentia than Tennyson could ever be.

Similarly, it was Joyce’s Irishness that enabled him to translate the great tradition of English prose style into something else, for which the nearest but misleadingly inadequate term is pastiche. Joyce develops this unpromising line of writing in a supremely creative way, so that it goes well beyond any pejorative notion of the derivative. Stephen Heath explores this way of reading in his essay ‘Ambiviolences’, originally published in French in Tel Quel, later translated for the volume Postmodern Joyce edited by Derek Attridge. This, combined with Linda Hutcheon’s book on parody, may provide a more appropriate critical vocabulary for articulating what is distinctive about Walcott’s voice and achievement than one ultimately resting on the identity politics of nationalism and liberal individualism.

Walcott is in the same relationship to both British and American literature as Jonson and Pope were to Latin and as Eliot and Pound were to British: he writes from outside. A schoolboy encountering the British poets in the West Indies encounters them as writers in something resembling a foreign or even dead language, for they bear the imprint of somebody else’s history. For that reason, Home, Christ, ale, master will sound differently for him as they did for Stephen Dedalus; so will ‘our’ and ‘old’. Hence Walcott can rework
Lowell in a way that would be impossible for an American poet and only theoretically possible for a British one.

So, in the last poem of the first section, which is itself called ‘North and South’, Walcott takes Lowell’s image of ‘Piles/ of dead leaves that char the air’, which comes in ‘Where the rainbow ends’, and splits it into two to create a third:

Fragments of paper swirl round the bronze general of Sheridan Square, syllables of Nordic tongues (as an Obeah priestess sprinkles flour on the doorstep to ward off evil, so Carthage was sown with salt);
the flakes are falling like a common language on my nose and lips, and rime forms on the mouth of a shivering exile from his African province. (p. 12)

This third image is language itself. It is the medium which, by being foregrounded, acquires the power to hold in solution so wide a range of temporal and spatial allusions, dissolving the lyric identity into a compound ghost as Afro-Greek under imperial Rome, or as servant under the British raj, or, later, ‘any child of the Diaspora’. The place of the poem similarly is sufficiently fluid for other places to show through – Fort Charlotte, Carthage and Tobago. Language, however, is a polluted medium, polluted by the history of those who have used it, and the flakes of snow that settle on his lips later darken into the obscene fallout from the chimneys of Treblinka: ‘The mania/ of history veils even the clearest air’ (p. 14).

The consciousness constructed by the poem is a negative one, not in the Keatsian sense of negative capability (although that is included), but in the sense of being like a space held open for the reader to define. The poet sees, listens, remembers, thinks, shivers, is tired, leads a tight life, cannot believe, stands paralyzed, mistrusts, turns back, lies under a blanket, feels flu, cannot help. The horrors of history are registered in a continuum that unites Carthage, Rome, London, Berlin and Washington, and there’s no doubt who are the perpetrators of the horrors, but the poet goes no further than claiming ‘the privilege/ to be yet another of the races they fear and hate/ instead of one of the haters and afraid’. His reflex action is to step aside from the snake-like evil of racism. Only, at the very end, he asserts his sole positive identity, as singer:

I collect my change from a small-town pharmacy, the cashier’s fingertips still wince from my hand as if it would singe hers – well, yes, je suis un singe, I am one of that tribe of frenetic or melancholy primates who made your music for many more moons than all the silver quarters in the till. (p. 16)

It is in writing itself, then, that experience can be transformed and perhaps, in a fictive, potential sense, redeemed. This is the promise with which the whole volume ends, ‘The Season of Phantasmal Peace’ (pp. 98-99) – the
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The previous poem, 'The Fortunate Traveller', had ended with forebodings of the third horseman of the apocalypse who brings the plague of locusts. The plague is of locusts because the so-called North-South dialogue is about world-famine. Later in Revelation, the angel standing in the sun summons the fowls of the air to a fierce supper on the flesh of God's enemies. 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace' is perhaps a benign variant of this, a millenarian vision in which 'all the nations of birds' take away the shadows from things to weave a net of them, so that, by a sort of reversing out, the shadows become, instead of the inevitable doubles of existence in time and space, merely interstitial to light. This is the apotheosis of the poetics at work in 'North and South', which proceeds by a negativity that opens spaces and potentials rather than by counter-asserting positives. The poem thus produces itself by the same negative principle as did 'North and South', opening a space for the reader to occupy. But whereas in that poem the space had to be cleared, painfully, in heavily contaminated ground, involving the poet in delicate feats of strength and narrow escape, in this poem there is no threatening social occasion, no historical landscape, no difficult linguistic situation from which the poet has to rescue his song. Hence its purity. And the song that is sung throughout this volume is not the Iliad but the Odyssey, the epic of the perpetual traveller, perpetually homecoming, the epic Joyce selected to enable him to marry the figures of the Classical hero, the common man and the Wandering Jew. To these Walcott adds the many-voiced figure of the postcolonial, and we are all 'post-colonial' now.

NOTES

2. Helen Vendler, 'Poet of Two Worlds', NYRB, 4 March 1982, pp. 23-7, p. 23. Helen Vendler is not alone in expressing reservations about Walcott, but as her review is the most deeply considered and raises matters of fundamental critical principle it is the most appropriate for the purposes of this discussion.
5. Vendler, p. 26. This location of Walcott in social terms comes perilously close to a set of colonial attitudes more crudely displayed by Lachlan Mackinnon in his review of the same volume, 'Nobody, or a nation', TLS, 24 October 1986, pp. 1185-86, where Walcott is similarly seen as overwhelmed by Robert Lowell: 'The problem is that Walcott's cosmopolitan ambition can lead to rootlessness'. Walcott is implicitly advised that he should be less ambitious, or, if ambitious, not in a cosmopolitan way; he should stick to his native island of St Lucia, where he can cultivate his roots. It's rather like the World Bank, or, earlier, the Imperial and Colonial Office, encouraging Caribbean, African and Asian countries to stick to primary agricultural production for secondary processing by the imperial home industries. Localism and agriculture for them; cosmopolitanism and industry for us. The local crop on St Lucia is bananas.
6. Vendler, p. 26. The poet Mervyn Morris also dwells on this poem in his fine essay on The Fortunate Traveller in The Art of Derek Walcott, ed. by Stewart


27. Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 4. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


