

POETRY

Derek Walcott

Selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch

There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn," Derek Walcott said in his Nobel Prize lecture for 1992. That force of exultation and celebration of luck, along with a sense of benediction and obligation, a continuous effort of memory and excavation, and a "frightening duty" to "a fresh language and a fresh people," have defined Walcott's work for the past 50 years. He has always been a poet of great verbal resources and skills engaged in a complex struggle to render his native Caribbean culture: the New World—not Eden but a successor to Eden, a polyglot place, an archipelago determined to survive—a world he calls "a ferment without a history, like heaven . . . a writer's heaven."

Derek Walcott is the greatest poet and playwright writing in English that the West Indies has produced. His *Collected Poems* (1986) is itself a massive achievement, bringing together work from 10 previous books written between 1948 and 1984. It moves from his first privately printed pamphlet, *25 Poems*, to his Lowellian sequence, *Midsummer*. It includes early work from *The Castaway* and *The Gulf*, and his major autobiographical poem *Another Life* (which is his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*); and later work from *Sea Grapes*, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, and *The Fortunate Traveller*. Since *The Collected Poems*, he has published *The Arkansas Testament* (1987), *Omeros* (1990), which is a booklength reprise to *The Odyssey* that parallels Greek and Antillean experience, and *The Bounty* (1997). The themes of Walcott's poems are echoed and counterpointed by the ritual action and vernacular language of his major plays, from *Dream on Monkey Mountain* to *Remembrance* and *Pantomime* and on to *Beef, No Chicken*, *The Last Carnival*, and *A Branch of the Blue Nile*. Reading through Walcott's lifework, one is always aware of the covenant he has made with a people and a place.

Walcott has one of the finest ears of any poet writing in English since Hart Crane or Dylan Thomas. His descriptive powers are, as Joseph Brodsky pointed out, truly epic. He has repeatedly sought to give voice to the inlets and beaches, the hills, promontories, and mountains of his native country. The sea is an inescapable presence in his work and has fundamentally affected his sense of being an islander. ("The sea was my privilege/ and a fresh people," he writes in *Omeros*.) He exults so much in the salty tang of words themselves that at times it feels as if the vowels and consonants of his three-language vocabulary (English, English patois, and French patois) have been saturated by the sea itself. Each phrase seems "soaked in salt."

Here is the beginning of his early lyric "A Sea-Chantey":

Anguilla, Adina,
Antigua, Canelles,
Andreuille, all the *l*'s,
Voyelles, of the liquid Antilles . . .

There is a quality of earthly prayer in the way Walcott luxuriates in sounds and savors letters, turning over the words, holding up the names. A sacred sense of vocation informs his high eloquence and powerful commitment to articulating his native realm, calling out “the litany of islands,/ The rosary of archipelagoes” and “the amen of calm waters.”

Walcott was born in 1930 in Castries, the capital of St. Lucia. He entered the province of poetry empowered by the feeling that he was speaking not just out of his own experience but for everything he saw around him, naming a world thus far undefined:

Forty years gone, in my island childhood, I felt that
the gift of poetry had made me one of the chosen,
that all experience was kindling to the fire of the Muse.
(*Midsummer*)

Walcott's early Adamic pact with his island was also balanced by a sense of self-division and estrangement. He grew up as a “divided child”—a Methodist in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, a developing artist with a middle-class background and a mixed African, English, and Dutch ancestry coming of age in a mostly black world, a backwater of poverty. Some of the dramatic tension in his work comes from the gap he has always had to cross to describe the people with whom he shares an island. So, too, a great deal of rage sometimes breaks loose in his work as a fury against racism: against those who have typed the poet as neither black nor white enough; against those who still view the Caribbean people as illegitimate and rootless; against the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Walcott has called himself “a mulatto of style,” and increasingly has given voice to the contending languages and cultures operating inside him. The Odyssean figure of Shabine undoubtedly speaks for his creator when he uses the demotic and turns the language of colonial scorn into a source of pride:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.
(“The Schooner *Flight*”)

Homer has become Walcott's tutelary spirit, and he mimics *The Odyssey* here by echoing that moment when Odysseus slyly deceives the Cyclops by calling himself “nobody.” He is also asserting that this “nobody” is the culture's representative figure, “a nation.” Walcott's Caribbean reworking of *The Odyssey*, *Omeros*, suggests that the task of the Homeric bard is to unearth lost lives and shattered histories, but also to sing of a new people and a new hope.

Walcott is ultimately a poet of affirmations, a writer who believes that the task of art is to transcend history and rename the world. As he says in “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” “For every poet it is always morning in the world. History a forgotten, insomniac night; History and elemental awe are

always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History.” The poet’s enterprise is a redemptive one, a joyous calling. Derek Walcott’s lifework is a grand testament to the visionary powers of language and to the freshening wonders of a world that is always starting over again despite History, a world that is always startling and new.

Sea Grapes

That sail which leans on light,
tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean

for home, could be Odysseus,
home-bound on the Aegean;
that father and husband’s

longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is
like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa’s name
in every gull’s outcry.

This brings nobody peace. The ancient war
between obsession and responsibility
will never finish and has been the same

for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore
now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,
since Troy sighed its last flame,

and the blind giant’s boulder heaved the trough
from whose groundswell the great hexameters come
to the conclusions of exhausted surf.

The classics can console. But not enough.

Names

(for Edward Brathwaite)

I

My race began as the sea began,
with no nouns, and with no horizon,
with pebbles under my tongue,
with a different fix on the stars.

But now my race is here,
in the sad oil of Levantine eyes,
in the flags of the Indian fields.

I began with no memory,
I began with no future,
but I looked for that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon—
for the goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter from Canton,
as a fishline sinks, the horizon
sinks in the memory.

Have we melted into a mirror,
leaving our souls behind?
The goldsmith from Benares,
the stonemason from Canton,
the bronzesmith from Benin.
A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
and my race began like the osprey
with that cry,
that terrible vowel,
that I!

Behind us all the sky folded,
as history folds over a fishline,
and the foam foreclosed
with nothing in our hands

but this stick
to trace our names on the sand
which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

II

And when they named these bays
bays,
was it nostalgia or irony?

In the uncombed forest,
in uncultivated grass
where was there elegance
except in their mockery?

Where were the courts of Castille?
Versailles' colonnades
supplanted by cabbage palms
with Corinthian crests,
belittling diminutives,
then, little Versailles
meant plans for a pigsty,
names for the sour apples
and green grapes
of their exile.

Their memory turned acid
but the names held;
Valencia glows
with the lanterns of oranges,
Mayaro's
charred candelabra of cocoa.
Being men, they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of every thing to be a noun.
The African acquiesced,
repeated, and changed them.

Listen, my children, say:
moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry,
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends

our natural inflections.

These palms are greater than Versailles,
for no man made them,
their fallen columns greater than Castille,
no man unmade them
except the worm, who has no helmet,
but was always the emperor,

and children, look at these stars
over Valencia's forest!

Not Orion,
not Betelgeuse,
tell me, what do they look like?
Answer, you damned little Arabs!
Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.

The Season of Phantasmal Peace

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

And men could not see, looking up, what the wild geese drew,
what the ospreys trailed behind them in silvery ropes
that flashed in the icy sunlight; they could not hear
battalions of starlings waging peaceful cries,
bearing the net higher, covering this world
like the vines of an orchard, or a mother drawing
the trembling gauze over the trembling eyes
of a child fluttering to sleep;

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

A Sea-Chantey

*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme, et volupté.*

—Baudelaire

Anguilla, Adina,
Antigua, Cannelles,
Andreuille, all the *I*s,
Voyelles, of the liquid Antilles,
The names tremble like needles
Of anchored frigates,
Yachts tranquil as lilies,
In ports of calm coral,
The lithe, ebony hulls
Of strait-stitching schooners,
The needles of their masts
That thread archipelagoes
Refracted embroidery
In feverish waters
Of the seafarer's islands,
Their shorn, leaning palms,
Shaft of Odysseus,
Cyclopic volcanoes,
Creak their own histories,
In the peace of green anchorage;
Flight, and Phyllis,
Returned from the Grenadines,
Names entered this Sabbath,
In the port clerk's register;
Their baptismal names,
The sea's liquid letters,
Repos donnez à cils . . .
And their blazing cargoes
Of charcoal and oranges;
Quiet, the fury of their ropes.
Daybreak is breaking
On the green chrome water,
The white herons of yachts
Are at Sabbath communion,
The histories of schooners
Are murmured in coral,
Their cargoes of sponges
On sandspits of islets,
Barques white as white salt
Of acrid St. Maarten,
Hulls crusted with barnacles,

Holds foul with great turtles,
Whose ship-boys have seen
The blue heave of Leviathan,
A seafaring, Christian,
And intrepid people.

Now an apprentice washes his cheeks
With salt water and sunlight.

In the middle of the harbour
A fish breaks the Sabbath
With a silvery leap.
The scales fall from him
In a tinkle of church bells;
The town streets are orange
With the week-ripened sunlight,
Balanced on the bowsprit
A young sailor is playing
His grandfather's chantey
On a trembling mouth organ;
The music curls, dwindling
Like smoke from blue galleys,
To dissolve near the mountains.
The music uncurls with
The soft vowels of inlets,
The christening of vessels,
The titles of portages,
The colours of sea grapes,
The tartness of sea-almonds,
The alphabet of church bells,
The peace of white horses,
The pastures of ports,
The litany of islands,
The rosary of archipelagoes,
Anguilla, Antigua,
Virgin of Guadeloupe,
And stone-white Grenada
Of sunlight and pigeons,
The amen of calm waters,
The amen of calm waters,
The amen of calm waters.