

Noah Swinney | swnnoa001

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SWNNOA001

noahswinney@gmail.com

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Derek Walcott’s post-colonial poetics
of imagination in “The Sea Is History”

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In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid, but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.¹

European culture, in the aftermath of empire, was not only entrenched, but also inseparable from the culture of the Caribbean and its history. The Caribbean like most postcolonies, had developed a kind of Stockholm syndrome in regard to the West; the cultures of the empire had been assimilated, adapted and appropriated, becoming an intrinsic part of their cultural and historical DNA. The postcolony thus develops an inferiority complex based on this assimilation, constantly and masochistically measuring itself against the empire. Walcott’s “The Sea is History”, and indeed the whole of *The Star-Apple Kingdom* addresses this complex.

Derek Walcott believed that writing was in itself a reality, a reality made true through imagination. As Robert D. Hamner writes of the poem “no matter what memory preserves, history... remains within the province of man to build with (or in spite of) the present.”² “The Sea Is History” is Walcott’s attempt at constructing a present from memories locked in the past he imagines to be buried in the sea.

Poets of aesthetic allow the eye to be informed by a philosophy based on lived experiences, and Derek Walcott is no exception. As part of a minority, Walcott was in many ways an outsider. In “The Schooner *Flight*”, another poem from *the Star-Apple Kingdom*, the protagonist Shabine speaks for Walcott when he says, “I had a sound colonial education/I have Dutch, nigger and English in me/and either I am nobody or I’m a nation.”³ Later in the same poem Shabine says “I had no nation now but imagination./After the white man, the niggers didn’t want me” and further down the stanza, “I wasn’t black enough for their pride.” As Bruce King writes, “Walcott had created a voice, a tone, a character who was both a persona and yet the embodiment of the complexities of the Caribbean.”⁴ This

¹ Derek Walcott, “The Caribbean Culture or Mimicry?”, in *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Miami, 1974), 6

² Robert D Hamner, *Derek Walcott*, (Caribbean: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 133

³ Walcott, “The Schooner *Flight*”, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979)

⁴ Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 375

persona and idea of nation and self – a person of between, of ‘nobody’ or ‘nation’ – pervades “The Sea Is History”.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, (1-2)

The poem begins by introducing a fictional dialogue, a call and response that follows in the tradition of philosophic verse, an example being Yeats’ “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”. In “The Sea is History”, the questioner and the questioned, are introduced to play out Walcott’s historical philosophy. “Sirs” the answer is returned, and with the address the two voices are staged, an inquisitor from a position of power and authority, and an answerer from a position of weakness. The word ‘sir’ holds connotations of servitude and obedience, used as a sign of respect. Its etymological variant ‘sire’ originates from the Latin *senior* meaning ‘older’ or ‘elder’. Those who are not given the title are therefore demoted to an infantile diminutive status and by extension their manhood is questioned. It is not insignificant that black servants and slaves were called “boy” regardless of age by whites and made to call white men “sir”. But this phenomenon is not specific to transatlantic slavery or even to race politics.

In *Intestines of the State*, Argenti explains how the elite of the Grassfields, Cameroon reserved the status of elder for meglocrats and the wealthy, age was *not* the prerequisite.⁵ In this way, a hierarchy of power was delineated through the ‘elder’ system similar to the systems of address in the American slave economy and the colonies like the Caribbean. Argenti continues then to discuss how the oppressed of the Grassfields, subverted this hierarchy through performance of the masked dances, in which colonisers and elites would be mimicked, idolised, parodied and appropriated to create something entirely new. “The mimetic—what imitates—is not imitative: *it is new.*”⁶ And this kind of performance is not endemic to only Cameroon but applies to the Hauka movement in Nigeria, and of course to Walcott’s Caribbean. “Masking is an embodied practice,” and poetry is a meta-textual practice, masking “represents a non-discursive, and therefore gnomic, form of remembering”, while poetry represents a hyper-discursivity that also defies definition, an imaginative form of remembering.⁷ Walcott writes, “mimicry is an act of imagination.”⁸ When he, a ‘mixed’ man uses the word “sir”, in his poetry, it is mimicry, and is therefore imaginative and new, because “to name is to contradict.”⁹

Thus Walcott establishes a kind of power dynamic between oppressor and oppressed in his poem’s first few lines: The ‘answerer’ of the poem is not addressed as sir. The ‘sirs’ terminates the line, rhyming with the last syllable of ‘martyrs’, creating a slightly anxious half-rhyme before the eye of the reader drops to the next line. This physical downward motion of the eye consolidates the diminution of the second voice, which takes on the ‘subaltern’ voice in

⁵ Nicolas Argenti, *The Intestines of the State* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28

⁷ *Ibid.*, 244

⁸ Walcott, “The Caribbean Culture or Mimicry?”, 10

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12

contrast to the first 'above' inquisitor voice, who assumes the coloniser. In the eleventh stanza of the poem the answerer uses the word again, he says that his Renaissance, "Sir, is locked in them sea-sands". This line dips into Caribbean vernacular more common to "The Schooner *Flight*" and is juxtaposed against the heightened poetic voice of the rest of the poem. Thus the two voices can also be read as two nations – the empire and the colony. Walcott often wrote of himself as almost an entire nation: "I am nobody or I'm a nation."¹⁰ And where the West instructed and lead in the physical and on land, beneath the ocean where the bones of slaves are "soldered by coral to bone," the Caribbean will lead a metaphysical exploration: where a shark's shadow is a "benediction", where the "sunlight on the sea floor" takes on symbolic, mythical significance. Like the "plucked wires" of "the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage". Walcott sees the sea as a "grey vault" of painful memories. But it is not a static site, malicious or terrible, it is a kinetic metamorphic energy that Walcott sees as returning dignity and beauty to the spirit of the Caribbean nation and black America.

For Walcott the sea is his symbol of an imagined archive of renewal, a "grey vault" filled with forgotten memories of violence and martyrdom with the power to beatify a nation's pain. For Walcott the sea is movement that preserves and saves nothing, "the ocean kept turning blank pages" he says, and the drowned men "sank without tombs", and the bones are "ground by windmills/into marl and cornmeal". The sea spares nothing, it relinquishes nothing, all is assimilated and appropriated into the sea's vast body, into its sea-sands and "groined caves". The word "groined" is aptly chosen – an architectural word that relates to vaults formed by the intersection of two barrel shapes. So the idea of the sea as a "grey vault", full of memory is reiterated. It is only through imagination that the sea's vaults are unlocked and its historical treasures mined.

Throughout the poem the 'treasures' of the sea are made explicit in images of precious jewels or commodities, a fish – "the crusty grouper" is described as an "onyx-eyed...bald queen" weighted by jewels. In the sixth and seventh stanza the "white cowries clustered like manacles/on the drowned women" are imagined as "the ivory bracelets/of the Song of Solomon". These images brings to mind certain descriptions from the biblical Song of Solomon, such as "His hands *are as* gold rings set with the beryl: his belly *is as* bright ivory overlaid *with* sapphires." Or "thy cheeks are comely with rows of *jewels*, thy neck with its *necklace*." The drowned enslaved women, clad in cowries become Shulamite, the female protagonist of the Song of Solomon with bodies as precious as though adorned with "gold rings set with beryl". Thus Walcott performs a poetic reclaiming of the value system by which a slave's worth was measured. If transatlantic trade measured slaves as commodity imports, weighed against other African exports: ivory, gold etc. Walcott gives these objects, (ivory, jewels and onyx) the metaphysical and timeless value they hold in The Song of Solomon. He returns a reverence and preciousness; a nobility even, to those martyred by the violence of the slave trade. Their worth is beyond crude material or

¹⁰ Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*", also see King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* p.375, King says of Walcott that he wrote "poems about himself as if he were a generation of people".

commodity value, it takes on a religious and mythical worth. His Shulamite is bedecked and glittering with the jewels of martyrdom. The sea alone can hold these memories. In the words of Yeats' it is "All changed, changed utterly:/A terrible beauty is born."

The lantern of a caravel
And that was Genesis.
Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus. (8-12)

What makes this passage the most striking of the poem is the harsh juxtaposition of the horrific meaning of the words and the skilful auditory craft of the words; their music: the alliteration of "packed cries" chimes off the previous end word "caravel", which also holds a rhyme of consonance with the word "packed"; the higher in pitch "shit" is a sharpened and staccato half-rhyme of the last syllable in "Genesis"; "moaning" similarly sounds off its consonance with the "-o" sound in "Exodus". These musical interplays of words, conceptually pair the sacred with the profane – "shit" with "Genesis"; "moaning" with "Exodus". The creation and liberation come from pain and suffering. Walcott does not portray Exodus as a romantic return of the lost people to African roots as was the popular Pan-Africanist approach in the late '70s, exemplified in the Bob Marley's lyric "Exodus", in which he sings

We know where we're from.
We're leaving Babylon,
We're going to our Father land.¹¹

Walcott rather dubs the passage *from* Africa the Exodus, and instead of the parting of the seas, or the romantic return Marley sings of – the breaking of chains, equality and "wipe away transgression" – Walcott uses a comma after the line, "the shit, the moaning:" which grammatically equates the packed cries, the shit and moaning to the holy Exodus. The "Babylonian bondage" he writes of is slavery and the promised land is the Caribbean not Africa.

Something too, must be said here for the form of the poem, its written in a loose iambic form, sticking mostly to tercets and occasionally snapping lines into quatrains. The rhythm varies hugely from lines of heptameters to the single monometer line, "mosaics". The result is a bumpy, ricocheting rhythm, not unlike Hopkins' alliterated rhythms. Walcott does exploit alliteration to this rhythmic purpose. Perhaps the most successful exploit being:

It's all subtle and submarine,
Through colonnades of coral (38-9)

And yet Walcott's rhythm is more fragmentary than Hopkins, and more fragmentary still from the American influences of Whitman and Lowell. It's as

¹¹ Bob Marley, "Exodus", from *Exodus*, (Island Records, 1977)

though Walcott were mimicking the jagged rhythms of a stormed ocean, appropriating the swells and crashes of what he calls the “heaving oil” into the poetic voice of the diaspora. Maybe the rhythms of a fragmented nation or the rhythms of nobody: the heirs of the diaspora. He, like the “white sisters” is “clapping/to the wave’s progress,/and that was Emancipation –”.

Walcott’s claim that writing is a reality in itself and it creates its own reality and that a new West Indian person could be made by the word, the logos, in which there would be a new Adam, undivided, without reference to Europe or Africa.¹²

Walcott sought through his poetry to imagine an alternative history, and an alternative reality, independent of the colonial archive; a history wrought from the Caribbean imagination: from island imagination, from oceanic imagination. He uses poetry as meta-language, a language that uses prosody and music to sing and say what language can never express – the history of amnesia, pain and bondage. His poem “The Sea Is History”, is his attempt to dispel such amnesia, to wake the ghosts of slavery and reclaim a history that will martyr and bless sufferance; that will deck them in the jewels of the past.

¹² King, *Derek Walcott*, 372

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