

## FURTHER THOUGHTS ON A CARIBBEAN SUBLIME: WALCOTT'S MUSINGS ON HISTORY

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Those who break a tradition first hold it in awe

My argument here is an extension of claims which I make elsewhere that there is a fundamental cleavage in (the study of) Caribbean literature and culture, a dichotomy (or perhaps, in these Post-Structuralist times, a *différance*) between those who adopt a *philosophical* approach (what Walcott calls here the 'Classicist' approach) and those who adopt a *rhetorical* approach (his term for those who adopt this approach is the 'Radicals').<sup>1</sup> Demonstrating great affinity with the views of Modernists and New Critics like T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks as well as, through them, with Neoclassical theorists such as Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson and Edward Young, I contend that Walcott exemplifies in the Caribbean context the former approach, the basic tenets of which accordingly shapes his views on a number of issues addressed in "The Muse of History," not least how we should conceptualise the process of history, the nature of Caribbean cultural identity, Caribbean society and polity and, last but not least, language and, by extension, literature in the region.

Walcott begins by arguing famously that all denizens of the 'New World' are "victims" (1) of the "tradition" (1) which we have come to call "colonialism" (1). Each of us, both coloniser and colonised, is a "colonial" (21), haunted (albeit in different ways) by an undeniable "*horror of the past*" (my emphasis; 4) that comes, seemingly, with the territory. For "us in the archipelago" (6), he argues, the "old vision of paradise wrecks here" (6) precisely because the "tribal memory is salted with the bitter memory of migration" (6), voluntary in some cases and involuntary in others. The result is that one of our ancestors, the enslaver and "torturer" (4), is "screaming for pardon" (4) by contrast to the other, the slave and the victim, who is screaming for "revenge" (4). This painful dichotomy, the experience of being torn between the desire for forgiveness and revenge, is "our inheritance" (4) and gives rise to either a "literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters" (2).

Walcott distinguishes between, on the one hand, that group of thinkers which he terms the "radicals" (1), comprising an unnamed number of thinkers that includes historians and sociologists as well as writers and critics like, arguably, Kamau Brathwaite (who is, of course, often painted as Walcott's nemesis) and, on the other, those whom he calls variously "patrician writers" (1) and "classicists" (1). The latter group explicitly includes the American Walt Whitman, the Chilean Pablo Neruda, the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, the Guadeloupeans St. John Perse and Aimé Césaire, as well as Walcott himself arguably. These two groups, Walcott argues, are divided by significantly different theories of history, cultural identity, political transformation, language and literature. Walcott offers here, I would argue, merely another nomenclature for a fundamental division in our approach to

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<sup>1</sup>For further details on the precise emphases differentiating these approaches, see my "Some Thoughts on a (Caribbean) Sublime."

the production and interpretation of symbolic action in the region that I have elsewhere labelled, among other possibilities, the 'philosophical' and the 'rhetorical.' Walcott's sympathies are, evidently, with the Classicists to whom the region owes far more, he believes, than to the Radicals. This is mainly because the former underscore "our great debt to the great dead" (1), that is, the impossibility of denying the intellectual and, more specifically, the literary heritage which we have inherited. Moreover, arguing that the seeming "indifference to change" (1) of the Classicists is merely a ruse in the service of "irony" (2), Walcott contends that their wisdom consists ultimately in the perhaps paradoxical view that "those who break a tradition first hold it in awe" (1). In other words, if true change, a fresh start, is in fact to be made by the descendants of both masters and slaves in the region, and if a painful past is really to be left behind once and for all, this can only be done by first embracing the *entire* hand which one has been dealt: "maturity is the *assimilation* of the features of *every* ancestor" (my emphases; 1). The reason for this, Walcott asserts, is that "by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it" (1) merely, for "revolutionary literature" (1) is, in the final analysis, ironically motivated by a basically "*filial* impulse" (my emphasis; 1) that is ultimately Oedipal in nature. The upshot is that the apple never falls far from the tree. Gesturing perhaps unconsciously towards the distinction made famous initially by Edward Said between 'filiation' to one's 'natal culture' and 'affiliation' to theoretical modes of thought and conceptual frameworks that foster a 'critical consciousness' of or perspective on that culture, Walcott contends that the Classicist, by contrast, rejects the "filial . . . idea of history" (27) which merely "justifies and explains and expiates" (27).

### History

Where, in Walcott's view, the so-called Classicists have quite "gone past the *confrontation* of history" (my emphasis; 2), by contrast the so-called Radicals continue to "*wrestle* with that past" (my emphasis; 1). The Radicals are, in Walcott's famous metaphor, in thrall to the "muse of history" (2) which has become their inspiration. They espouse a linear model of historical change, "history seen as sequential time" (6), "history as a ladder of achievement" (19), and equate history with the "rational madness of progress, of a dominated future" (6). His skepticism towards this point of view is evident in his dismissal, as so many "comic" (6) caricatures, of such well-known "hieroglyphics of progress" (6) as the "heresy" (6) of the "world's becoming holy from Crusoe's footprint or the imprint of Columbus' knee" (6): the "discoverer sets a shod foot on virgin sand, kneels, and the savage also kneels from his bushes in awe" (6). Does this really constitute 'progress,' Walcott wonders. The Radicals' linear conception of history eventuates only in "shame and awe" (2) because, for the Radical, the slave's "amnesia" (4), his/her forgetting of his/her lost but real identity, is the "true history of the New World" (4). History, in this scheme of things, is a chain of cause and effects which, when properly deciphered, reveals the causes of the present predicament in the horrors of the past. To "understand" (4) why the slave experienced amnesia, to either "condemn or justify" (4) it, is the "method of history, and those explanations are always the same: this happened because of that, this was understandable because . . ." (4), Walcott writes.

By contrast, Walcott argues, the Classicists are often criticised for exhibiting a fear of change and, thus, a corresponding "veneration of the Old" (1) which have been equated with the "idolatry of the mestizo" (1) or 'half-breed.' They are accused of either having no

"sense of history" (21) at all or the "other sense" (21), the prejudice that some histories are preferable to others, in this case the view that the "history of Africa or of Asia is inferior" (21). Walcott agrees that the Classicist demonstrates a "contempt for historic time" (2), but argues that this is because he "sees history" (22), at least as it is conceived by the Radicals, "for what it is in the world around him" (22): an "almost inexpressible banality" (22). The Classicist, he believes, "sees the twentieth century without self-deceit and juvenile fantasy" (22). This is because the Classicist adheres to another conception of history altogether, preferring to think, paradoxically, in terms of the "simultaneity of history" (3). In lieu of history-qua-change, the Classicist evinces a "cyclic vision" (3) of life: his "sense of the past is of a timeless, yet habitable moment" (1). This model of history Walcott christens, with a tip of the hat to Modernist forerunners like T. S. Eliot, "tradition" (7). From this point of view, particular occurrences are never left behind once and for all. Rather, "tradition . . . is alert, alive, simultaneous" (7). What patrician writers accordingly "repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old" (2), the fact the little *per se* has changed in any significant way. If the conception of a distinct break, a rupture, demarcating the boundary between the "New and the Old becomes increasingly absurd, what must happen to our sense of time, what else can happen to history itself, but that it too is becoming absurd?" (6), Walcott asks. The classicist view of history accordingly does not take the form of a "jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun" (3) but, rather, of an "*elation* which sees everything as *renewed*" (my emphases; 3). For Borges, for example, the "death of a gaucho does not merely repeat, but is, the death of Caesar" (3).

For the Classicists, consequently, "history is *fiction*, subject to a fitful muse, memory" (my emphasis; 2). The Radicals are oblivious to the fact that the writing of history is merely a fictive recreation or interpretation, rather than an actual encounter with, the past by means of the deployment of basically literary and rhetorical strategies. In a manner reminiscent of Hayden White's excoriation of practising historians and Analytic philosophers of history for their refusal to recognise the literary and rhetorical dimensions of historiography, Walcott argues that the

method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative *fiction*. In time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to *invention*. The further the facts, the more history petrifies into *myth*. Thus, as we grow older as a race, we grow aware that *history is written*, that it is a *kind of literature* without morality. (my emphases; 2)

In short, Walcott argues, historical "fact evaporates into myth" (3) and myth, in turn, is nothing less than the "partial recall of the race" (2), for which reason, "everything depends on whether we write this *fiction* through the memory of hero or of victim" (my emphasis; 2). The difference between the Radicals and the Classicists on this score boils down to simply this: where the former fails to comprehend the fictive nature of all history-writing, the latter, only too aware of this, voluntarily "curses the banality [of history] and chooses myth" (22) in the knowledge that all so-called historical 'facts' are merely in the final analysis interpretations.

### **Cultural Identity**

These opposed models of history (history qua change versus history qua cycle) underpin

differing conceptions of cultural identity. The Radicals, in their "rage for identity" (2), fail to see that the paradox of their model of identity lies precisely in the claim that identity (sameness over time) is a product of change. Because, for the Radicals, the New World inhabitant is a "creature chained to his past" (2), they "respect only incoherence or nostalgia" (2), that is, either the Radical laments the fact that identity ultimately falls apart precisely because subject to change or they yearn for an irretrievable past. The predominant emotions experienced by the Radical are accordingly "violent rejection" (1) and "fury" (1). For these "new prophets of bitterness" (26), precisely because they "contemplate only the shipwreck" (7) with which they equate the region, the

New World offers not elation but *cynicism*, a despair at the vices of the Old which they feel must be repeated. Their malaise is an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture and a melancholy at the new, and this can go as deep as a rejection of the untamed landscape, a yearning for ruins. (my emphasis; 7)

In this scheme of things, repetition of the Old is tragic, a source of despair rather than joy. This is because, Walcott contends, "seeded in their memories is an imagery of vines ascending broken columns, of dead terraces, of Europe as a nourishing museum" (7) irrelevant to the realities of the postcolonial present.

Prominent in the Radical camp are those whom he terms the "new magnifiers of Africa" (7), that is, those who claim that the Caribbean "tradition" (17) is "wholly African" (17) and whose "responses are alerted through the nostalgia of one race" (17). Miscegenation is frowned upon by such thinkers: "for pure black Afro-Aryanism" (17) (Walcott's gesture here towards Nazism is unmistakable),

only the unsoiled black is valid, and West Indianism is a taint, and other strains adulterate him. The extremists, the purists, are beginning to exorcise those infections, so that a writer of 'mixed,' hence 'degenerate,' blood can be nothing stronger than a liberal. (19)

One consequence of defining Caribbean identity in such limited (and limiting) ways is that, if the license to define Caribbean identity in univocal terms is granted to the Afrocentrists in our midst, it must also be extended to other sub-groups comprising the region. We must also, therefore, "allow the Asian and the Mediterranean the same fiction" (17) (and the nostalgia for a precolonial past is nothing more than this, Walcott argues, a fiction). For this reason, the "desolate terraces of Perse's epic memory will be as West Indian to the Middle Easterners among us as the kingdoms of the Guinea Coast are to Césaire or the poetry of China is to the Chinese grocer" (18). The Caribbean becomes, in this scheme of things, a merely contiguous concatenation of discrete groups, each defined racially by its ability to trace its roots to an earlier ancestor of a particular hue, caught up in the throes of a master-slave dialectic, an ever-present obsession with what Homi Bhabha terms 'cultural diversity' and an obliviousness to the reality of 'cultural difference'; and never the many shall meet.

Where the Radical is obsessed by the past, Walcott contends, the Classicist looks to the future and the boundless opportunities it affords: the Classicist embraces a "vision of man" (2) that is essentially "Adamic" (3) in that he is a builder of the future, a constructor of an edenic New World, at least as much as he is a product of the past. Classicists accordingly "reject ethnic ancestry for faith in elemental man" (5), preferring to think of the New World inhabitant as a "being inhabited by *presences*" (my emphasis; 2), rather than grounded in the past. Where the Radical's thinking is basically diachronic or chronological

in orientation, in other words, that of the Classicist, Walcott avers, is arguably synchronic or systematic: the latter's attention is not fixed obsessively on questions of provenance and origin but on those inter-relationships of race, geography and culture which constitute us in the present. This is why the Classicist embraces intermixture and hybridity. The fact that some, like Walcott himself, are "exotic hybrids, broken bridges between two ancestries, Europe and the Third World of Africa or Asia" (20) is not something of which to be ashamed, but to be embraced. Given the differences in their respective stances, one rooted in the past and the other located in the present and oriented towards the future, it is little wonder that while the Radicals are mired in resentment and fury, the Classicists experience sheer joy and wonder. Wary, in ways not acknowledged by the Radicals, of the "fearful magnet of older civilisations" (3) and having "paid his accounts to Greece and Rome" (3), the Classicist experiences "elation" (my emphasis; 3) and "enormous wonder" (my emphasis; 3), Walcott writes, as he "walks in a world without monuments and ruins" (3). What "astonishes" (my emphasis; 17) Walcott about the Classicists is "their elation" (17), that "staggering elation in possibility" (my emphasis; 17) that is founded on an "elation in presences" (17). What the Classicist latches on to is the

possibility of the individual Caribbean man, African, European, or Asian in ancestry, the enormous, gently opening morning of his possibility, his body touched with dew, his nerves as subtilised to sensation as the mimosa, his memory, whether of grandeur or of pain, gradually erasing itself as recurrent drizzles cleanse the ancestral or tribal markings from the coral skull, the possibility of a man and his language waking to *wonder* here. (my emphasis; 17)

This is why Walcott believes that he expresses thanks to all his ancestors who, "exiled from your own Edens . . . have placed me in the *wonder* of another, and that my inheritance and your gift" (my emphasis; 27).

### **Politics**

These differing conceptions of cultural identity in turn give rise, in each case, to a distinct "political philosophy" (20). The Radical's approach to such matters is, in Walcott's view, motivated by what is, in the final analysis, a *pseudo*-revolutionary spirit. Their political philosophy is, as we have seen, rooted in "cynicism" (3) and recrimination. Informing their "abrupt eruptions of defiance" (20) are what Walcott sees as "simplistic and shallow" (20), sentimental, pointless and quickly clichéd articles of faith which Walcott derides in this way:

that all blacks are beautiful is an enervating statement, that all blacks are brothers more a reprimand than a charter, that the people must have power almost their death wish. (20)

Given that revolution predicated on a linear model of time is ultimately a filial impulse, this ostensibly radical kind of thinking is informed, ironically, by a latent allegiance to the very conceptual categories which the Radical in fact yearns to reject: he

wants to effect a eugenic leap from imperialism to independence by longing for the ancestral dignity of the wanderer-warrior. Mysterious customs. Defunct gods. Sacred rites. As much as the colonial, however, they are children of the nineteenth-century ideal, the romance of redcoat and savage warrior, their simplification of choosing to play Indian rather than cowboy, filtered through film and adolescent literature, is the hallucination of imperial

romance, the posture is melodramatic, the language of its stances idealised from the literature of exploration remembered from Captain Marryat, Kipling, or Rider Haggard. It continues the juvenile romance of savage drums, tribal rites, barbarous but sacred sacrifices, golden journeys, lost cities. In the subconscious there is a black Atlantis buried in a sea of sand. (22)

European culture is rejected, Walcott argues, on the basis, ironically, of Eurocentric concepts, categories, myths and motifs: what "survives in the slave is nostalgia for imperial models, Europe or Africa" (26).

By contrast, in Walcott's view, the Classicist espouses a "political philosophy rooted in elation" (5), that word again, a joy derived from a Shelleyesque "belief in a second Adam, the re-creation of the entire order, from religion to the simplest domestic rituals" (5) and the creation of an "ideal possible society" (17). From their perspective, our "degraded arrival" (6) in the New World is really the "beginning, not the end of our history. The shipwrecks of Crusoe and of the crew in *The Tempest* are the end of an Old World" (6) and the commencement of another: out of the "monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice" (27) comes a new world. The Classicists' political philosophy is, consequently, a truly "revolutionary" (2) one; theirs is the "revolutionary spirit at its deepest" (3) and most true.

### Language and Literature

Predicated on the respective models outlined above of history, cultural identity and politics are two opposing models of language and, by extension, of literature. Given their historical, cultural and political views, the Radicals, in Walcott's opinion, "confuse language with linguistics and with archaeology" (25). They conceive of the slave's "language as enslavement" (2) to someone else's language, rather than as an instrument of freedom. When Caliban is viewed, Walcott writes, as the "enraged pupil" (3) of Prospero, the language which he learns in this way is equated with that of the "torturer mastered by the victim" (3). This is "viewed as servitude, not as victory" (3).

When the poet "limits his memory to the suffering of the victim" (3), his language is limited to "phonetic pain, the groan of suffering, the curse of revenge" (3). There inevitably ensues a rejection of what is deemed the "language of the master" (3) and a concomitant dismissal of the "'classic style' as stasis" (3), stagnant, stuck in the past and irrelevant to Caribbean people. A younger generation is accordingly "warned against assimilation" (20): "imitation, the basis of the tradition" (18) is rejected in favour of "originality" (18), which Walcott dismisses as the "false basis of innovation" (18). Being "obsessed with the innovation of forms" (22), the "radical poets" (4) conceive of the literary "tradition as [literary] history" (17), that is, more in terms of discontinuity and change than continuity and recurrence.

In prioritising novelty over repetition and thereby rejecting the concept of a literary *tradition* in favour of one of literary *history*, Walcott avers, the Radicals reduce poetry to a "form of historical instruction" (22) and an instrument of political change. Their target is the officialised literature of the schools, the sociologists, their fellow historians, and above all, the Revolution. They become fascinated with the efficacy of poetry as an aspect of power not through its language but

through its subject. Their poetry becomes a kind of musical accompaniment to certain theses. (22)

Literature in this scheme is reduced to little more than so many 'pièces à thèse,' reduced to a political and moral core of meaning – what the celebrated New Critic John Crowe Ransom called its "central logic or situation, or 'paraphrasable core'" (455), "ostensible substance" (459) or "logical structure" (462) – and oblivious to its *literary* specificity – what Ransom termed the "poetic increment" (459) or "local texture" (462) of a poem. Critics who view literature in this way are, as Ransom puts it, "men with moral axes to grind" (455) who are guilty of seeking to "isolate and discuss the 'ideology' or theme or paraphrase of the poem and not the poem itself" (456). Walcott argues that it is precisely because this literature "serves historical truth" (2) that it either "yellows into polemic" (2) (the literature of the former slaves) or "evaporates in pathos" (2) (the literature of the master). Whatever the emphasis, Walcott asserts, the result is a literature of "resignation" (4), of "fatalism" (4), and of "recrimination and despair" (2).

Walcott is consequently wary of what he characterises as the "literary religion" (8) which has "flare[d]" (8) in the region. The "polemic poet" (8), the new "glorifiers of the tom-tom" (8), in their quest to "produce an epic work" (8) strives to "summon the grandeur of the past, *not as myth but as history*" (my emphasis; 8), and to "prophecy" (8). But such writers do so, Walcott warns, "in the way that Fascist architecture can be viewed as prophecy" (8) (this is not, as we have seen, not the first – nor the last – allusion in the essay to what he views as the fascistic leanings and even a dangerous flirtation with genocidal thinking on the part of the Radicals.) The "'epic' poet in the islands" (8) creates an "*artificial past, a defunct cosmology without the tribal faith*" (my emphasis; 8). To this end, he looks to "anthropology, to a catalogue of forgotten gods, to midden fragments, artifacts, and the unfinished phrases of a dead speech" (8). But, given that "all epic is based on the visible presence of ruins" (9), when he

looks around these islands and finds no ruins, . . . the poet celebrates what little there is, the rusted slave wheel of the sugar factory, cannon, chains, the crusted amphora of cut-throats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history, as if the *ovens of Auschwitz* and *Hiroshima* were the temples of the race. (my emphasis; 9)

It is in this way that "morbidity" (9) becomes the predominant "tone" (9) of any form of literature which "bases its truth on shame or on revenge" (9). Art, he contends, "cannot last long in this shale" (20) for it "crumbles like those slogans, fragments and shards of a historical fault" (20).

Walcott contends that when the "imagination surrenders to the glorification of history" (8), the "ear becomes enslaved" (8) as well. Artistic "[p]ower . . . becomes increasingly divided and tribal when it is based on genetics" (20). This occurs whenever radical poetry "imitates what it believes to be the tribal mode" (22), using "fragments of the original language to adorn itself, even if such language is not its natural tongue" (22). In so doing, the "normal voice of the poet, his own speaking voice is lost, and no language is writ" (23). The result is, ironically, a "new conservatism" (23), a "new dignity more reactionary and pompous" (23). He accordingly lambastes what he terms the "degeneration of technique" (19) that is scarcely concealed in such literature by its alleged "originality" (19). "Bad verse written by blacks" (19), he intones, is supposed to be "better than good verse written by whites because, say the revolutionaries, the same standards do not apply" (19).

This is "seen as pride, the opposite of inferiority" (19). But Walcott dismisses such "belligerent naiveté" (19) and "joy unqualified" (19) as the hallmark of a "pubescent literature" (19) which may "resist" (19) even as it "also insinuates by resistance" (19) the "correctives of a 'superior' or at least an older discipline or tradition" (19). Such a literature, precisely because it "accepts subconsciously a condition of being praised or corrected" (19), can never be original. Walcott is clearly of the view that an obsession with ruptures, decisive breaks, rebellion and so on are a clue to the fact that we are often in thrall to the very things we believe perhaps too passionately that we must reject.

Moreover, the radical kind of literature attracts to it a certain mode of criticism informed by what Walcott considers to be a particularly reprehensible attitude on the part of (foreign, white) "critics of contemporary Commonwealth verse" (18). He has a number of labels for this kind of critic – "masochist-critic" (18), "tourist-critic" (18) and "liberal critic" (19) – but they all have in common the fact that they evince a "patronising" (18) attitude in their "demand for naturalness, novelty, originality, or truth" (18). Such demands are all based, however, on certain "preconceptions of behaviour" (18): they demand the exuberance, spontaneity, and refreshing dialect of the tribe. Certain performances are called for, including the fashionable incoherence of revolutionary anger. . . (18)

Everyone is thereby "appeased" (18): the "masochist-critic by the attack on his 'values'" as much as the "masochist-poet by the approval of his victim" (18). In making an "aesthetic out of anger" (18), the "anger of the black" (18) is turned into an "entertainment" (18) which is "no different in its 'naturalness' than the legendary joy or spontaneous laughter of the minstrel. It is still night-club and cabaret, professional fire-eating and dancing on broken bottles" (18), intended for the consumption of the tourist-critic on a quest to sample the exotic, the unusual, the extraordinary.

There are consequences, however, to such a quest on the part of the liberal-tourist-critic. Walcott believes that when such a critic "warms to the speech of the ghetto" (18), he in fact merely "perpetuates the sociological conditions of that speech" (19): what he "really preaches again, but this time through criticism, is the old separate-but-equal argument. Blacks are different" (19). The sad thing about such a literary *apartheid*, Walcott argues, is that "most blacks have been led to believe this, and into the tragedy of believing their difference" (19). The "unconscious accomplices" (19) of these liberal-tourist-critics are the "poets of the ghetto and of 'revolutionary rhetoric'" (19); together they fetishise this difference to the point where they "equate the deprived up to the status of the privileged" (19). But they are dishonest: the "educated and privileged poet" (19), Walcott contends, "masks his education and privilege behind a fake exoticism of poverty and the pastoral" (19). Such poets are hypocrites because they "fear to lose 'their own thing'" (19), the niche of power, privilege and attention which they have carved for themselves in this way, if they "let thought and education widen by materialist benefits" (19). Hence, they "write one way and speak another" (19), much to the enjoyment of the liberal-tourist-critic. For Walcott, the (perhaps unintended) result of all this is that a literary, critical and, by extension, intellectual *apartheid* is tragically re-installed that is different in no essential way from that which obtained in earlier phases of imperialism and colonialism.

By contrast, in keeping with their view of tradition rather than history, the Classicists consider "language not as linguistic process but as a living element" (25). In other words,

language is not something that changes, but an organic phenomenon that expands and grows over time, a common linguistic essence manifesting itself in a seeming variety of apparent phenomena. Walcott is of the view that if literature is an imitation of anything, it is at least in part not reality per se (or, at least, not in some linguistically unmediated fashion) but language, that is, the idioms actually spoken (and written) by people of all walks of life. (If Walcott's theory of literature evinces certain affinities with Modernist and New Critical forbears such as T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, it also anticipates later Structuralist and Post-Structuralist emphases.) For Walcott, accordingly, the poet's "function" (13) remains the "old one of . . . filter and purifier" (13) as he strives capture the "tone and strength of the common speech" (13) even as he makes use of the "hieroglyphs, symbols, or alphabet of the official one" (13).

Walcott is at pains to stress, however, that the capturing in this way of the *means* of representation is far more difficult than merely holding a mirror up to the *object* of representation. Hence, his view that many a West Indian poet is "faced with a language which he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language" (13). The "closer he brings hand and word to the precise inflections of the inner language and to the subtlest accuracies of his ear, the more chaotic his symbols will appear on the page, the smaller the regional dialect, the more eccentric his representation of it will become" (13). This is why, for Walcott, the "weight of the present" (4) torments great poets, serving as both a curse and a blessing and giving rise to perplexity and elation. For such poets, the "Caribbean sensibility" (18) is

not marinated in the past. It is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexity, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new. Its traces of melancholy are the chemical survivals of the blood which remain after the slave's and the indentured worker's convalescence. It will survive the malaria of nostalgia and the delirium of revenge just as it survived its self-contempt. (18)

The "elemental privilege of naming the new world" (5), in other words, the poet's task of assigning meaning to the world in which he finds himself in the present, Walcott argues, "annihilates history in our great poets . . . whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban" (5), replaced by an "*elation* common to all of them" (5), an elation of possibilities.

Though the patrician poet by nature looks towards the future, Walcott argues, the "pressure of the past . . . torments great poets" (4). This is because the poet necessarily carries "entire cultures in his head" (3) by virtue of his exposure to what Eliot calls the "great literary monuments of the past." In Walcott's own case, this led to the feeling that the "snow and daffodils" (25) of which he read were as "real, more real than the heat and the oleander" (25) of his own homeland precisely because they "lived on the page, in imagination and therefore in memory" (25). "There is a memory of imagination in literature which has nothing to do with actual experience" (25) and which is, in fact, "another life" (25), not insignificantly the title of one his most important books of poetry. The English and, by extension, the European literary tradition became something of an overwhelming burden for him, in Walter Bate's sense of this term: he confesses that, for good or for bad, "like any colonial child I was taught English literature as my natural inheritance" (25). He also stresses, however, that he could not help but also feel a "*fear* of Europe while I learned its poetry" (my emphasis; 26). He emphasises that he "*feared* the

cathedrals, the music, the *weight of history*, not because I was alien, but because I felt history to be the *burden of others*" (my emphasis; 26). The very "language I used" (26), he points out, consequently became an issue for his critics who accused him of merely aping the coloniser. However, he defends himself in this way: "I had been given it, and it was irretrievably given" (26) and it is for this reason that "I could no more give it back than they could claim it" (26).

Arguing that "[f]ear of imitation obsesses minor poets" (25), Walcott relies on a concept of the literary *tradition* that is predicated on *renewal* rather than the discovery of the new, *renovation* rather than innovation as such. This model of the literary tradition "annihilates provincial concepts of imitation and originality" (25) on the grounds that "in any age a *common genius* [not limited to any one individual] almost indistinguishably will show itself, and the perpetuity of this genius is the only valid tradition, not the tradition which categorises poetry by epochs and schools" (my emphasis; 25). Hence, Walcott's view that the

great poets have no wish to be different, no time to be original, that their originality emerges only when they have absorbed all the poetry which they have read, entire, that their first work appears to be the accumulation of other people's trash but that [in time] they become bonfires. (25)

Walcott draws a lesson concerning the relationship of the poet to his precursors from his discussion of the pivotal role played by religion in Caribbean culture. He remarks that as the slave "adapted his master's religion, he also adapted his master's language" (13). It is precisely "here that what we can look at as our poetic tradition begins. Now begins the new naming of things" (13). The 'abrogation and appropriation' of Christianity in this way marks the "beginning of the poetry of the New World" (12) in which the "language used is, like the religion, that of the conqueror of the God" (12). In short, just as the slave has "wrested God from his captor" (12), so too has the Caribbean poet wrested language from his canonical predecessors, turning it to his own ends, forcing it into different directions, thereby participating in that cyclical (re)naming of things common to all users of a particular language.

There is, in short, an implicit paradox to the poet's Janus-faced situation which forces him to carry the burden of the literary past even as he must also train his attention on the complexities of the present, all the while keeping one eye on the future. Moreover, the embracing of the literary tradition which he has inherited leads him ultimately to find his own autonomous voice, which induces him in turn to re-embrace the tradition in a never-ending cycle. In Walcott's own case, he reveals, the "older and more assured I grew, the stronger my isolation as a poet, the more I needed to become omnivorous about the art and literature of Europe" (26) if I were to "understand my own world" (26) at all.

Walcott provides a test-case of sorts designed to illustrate his contention that the best and most profound aspects of Caribbean culture are tantamount to a recycling of the earlier cultures. Arguing that the "primal imagination" (23) in West Indian literature, its "'revolutionary' aspect" (23), is found "evolving in West Indian [prose] fiction" (22), stressing that the "poetic principle is more alert in our best prose" (23), and acknowledging that prose fiction is derived from the epic, Walcott considers the specific role played by the genre of the *epic* in particular in the attempt by regional writers, and thinkers more broadly, to fictionalise, and thereby make sense of, the Caribbean condition:

in "tribal, elemental poetry, the epic experience of the race is compressed in *metaphor*" (my emphasis; 12). Walcott believes that the form of the epic, imbibed via paradigmatic biblical accounts, provides the basic formal matrix in which the Caribbean literary project is couched: the "Old Testament epics of bondage and deliverance provided the slave with a political parallel" (10), he writes. Hence, his view that the "epic poetry of the tribe originates . . . in its identification with Hebraic suffering, the migration, the hope of deliverance from bondage" (9), albeit "with this difference, that the passage over our Red Sea was not from bondage to freedom, but its opposite, so that the tribes arrived at their new Canaan chained" (9). This sentiment, the "wailing by strange waters for a lost home" (9) accordingly forms a "residual feeling in much of our literature" (9) and "survives in our politics" (9) and in the "subdued search for a Moses" (9).

Walcott acknowledges that the roots of the epic lie in the oral for the epic poem is always "already written . . . in the *mouths* of the tribe" (my emphasis; 9) and "compressed in the folk-legend" (13). Walcott views, for this reason, the epic as less a solipsistic exercise than the product of a communal "act of imagination" (13), that is, the result of the "creative effort of the tribe" (13) as a whole. The epic's "beginnings" (13) may be "oral, familial" (13) but, evidently, "even oral literature forces itself toward hieroglyph and alphabet" (13), resulting in the fact that later, "*individual* poets" (my emphasis; 13) undertake to try their hand at *writing* similar "legends" (13). Walcott uses this discussion of the oral and communal roots of the epic to offer an image that captures in a most striking way his conception of the literary tradition, that is, of the processes of *renovation*, rather than innovation, by which Caribbean literature perpetuates itself: in an oral tradition the mode is simple, the response open-ended so that each new poet can add his lines to the form, a process very much like weaving or the dance, based on the concept that the history of the tribe is endless. . . . The blues is not pathos, not the individual voice, it is a tribal mode and each new oral poet can contribute his couplet, and this is based on the concept that the tribe, inured to despair, will also survive: there is no beginning but no end. The new poet enters a flux and withdraws, as the weaver continues the pattern, hand to hand, mouth to mouth. . . . No history, but flux, and the only sustenance, myth. (12)

This is no slavish emulation or unwholesome regurgitation of inherited forms, Walcott stresses: the "difference" (12) lies in the "intensity of celebration" (12) whereby the "pietistic rhythm of the missionary is speeded to a martial frenzy which the slave adapts to a triumphal tribal mode" (12).

The solution to the problems inherent in the Radicals' model of literature, in Walcott's view, lies not in extolling its antithesis because, once the "contrition of the master replaces the vengeance of the slave" (4), colonial literature is at its most "pietistic" (4). Recrimination and fury are simply replaced by their distant relatives, regret and pietism. Rather, the "truly tough aesthetic of the new world" (2), which he identifies with the literary output of the patrician writers in our midst, "neither explains nor forgives history" (2) and "refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force" (2). It rejects both extremes: the poetry of the New World does not "pretend to such innocence, its vision is not naive" (5). Rather, its "savour is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience" (5). In this poetry there is "bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue. It is the acidulous that supplies its

energy. The golden apples of this sun are shot with acid" (5), as he puts it.

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