

Mark Morris

**THE PARTHENON IN TOBAGO:
ENCOUNTERING DEREK WALCOTT
AFTER THE 1970S¹**



I.

In the early 1980s I was in college in New York planning to become an engineer. One day I changed my major to English. Myth has probably replaced memory, but say the switch was driven by the poetry met with in a course: Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, those modernist writers. Pound—what was that? I had never heard the name. In high school, poetry meant the Romantics, the Victorians. Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” marked the high noon for all previous and subsequent verse. The twentieth century was unfocused, not collected under the name of a movement. Louis MacNeice’s “Carrickfergus” stayed with me, floating outside of time, as a boyhood poem set in Ireland. I can still recite the beginning:

I was born in Belfast between the mountains and the gantries
To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams:
Thence to Smoky Carrick in County Antrim
Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which jams

The little boats beneath the Norman castle.

¹ This essay, in an earlier version, was first delivered as a lecture at George Washington University, Washington, DC, in the fall of 2003.

The teacher explained that the Norman castle, which towers above the little boats, symbolizes English military dominance over the Irish. The poem, in the voice of a boy, notices the castle without drawing the political lesson. The boy is too young to see that spatial positions express relations of power.

The teacher explained the poem; that's not why I remembered it. I remembered it because of "hooting" and "clang" and "smoky Carrick" and "mud which jams," because of the jangle of sounds. Is "Carrick" a type of barn, a smokestack? What is "Antrim"? Weren't the Normans at Hastings? The teacher explained that the sirens meant factories, laborers who rode on trams. And in Carrick, the Irish were the masses who served the English lords high up in their Norman castle. *Norman* means *English*.

I tried hard to feel this interpretation, to make it sing spontaneously as I read the words. That did not happen. The poem said one set of things, the teacher said another. Metonymy (*sirens* for *factory*, *clang* for *urban working class bustle*) evokes the full context only if experience precedes it: life in a noisy city, or familiarity with the representations of such a life. A schoolboy from Belfast reads MacNeice's poem within the aura of direct perception and memory. A Jamaican from Kingston, on the other hand, must methodically infer rather than respond to the city. Perhaps I am idealizing the Irish reader here. Poetry will always mystify some youngsters.

The poetry I remember reading had the stupefying effect of mystifying speech that stops short of provoking questions. We were left in a limbo of inarticulate incomprehension. What is "Carrick"? Or, in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," put in the anthology under "Nature"—"Behold her, single in the field, you solitary Highland Lass"—what is "Highland"? Is "Lass" different from "girl"? What is a "Highland Lass"? The answers, which the teacher supplied, had a limited utility: Carrick is the name of a town in Ireland; in English vernacular, *lass* means *young woman* or *girl*. These answers stir no memory. But then again the unexpressed questions pointed to gaps in experience, to a lived absence that a definition, a gloss, cannot remedy. This absence—perceptions that were never there—lay at the heart of the matter. And because of it, incomprehension blocked the whole poem; the meaning of the exercise of reading this poem and studying it; and, ultimately, the meaning of studying any poetry at all. What is the good of this? Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, being a novel, prolonged the duration of the question. I read this book seven times for an examination, memorizing paragraphs and exegeses

so that I could “discuss” the symbolism of names, the imagery of costume and countryside, the virtues of rustic character planted in the soil. What is the good of this, aside from being able to pass the test?

Fingering the culprit of my incomprehension is a parlor game: bad teachers; books from England for a West Indian’s schooling; personal obtuseness; some people just can’t read poetry. All of the above. I have heard it deplored that the syllabus did not represent our speech and our imagination, what we daily perceive and the way we verbalize perception: “The hurricane does not roar the pentameter.” Does this explain the difficulties I had? I don’t believe so. Within a year after leaving school and showing up at university, like everybody else I fell into the vortex of Conrad and Dostoevsky; and a little later, of Eliot, Joyce, and Pound. (In those days, if memory serves, Pound’s anti-Semitism and fascism merely stained, they did not pollute, his reputation; and even when discussing “Gerontion,” where “the Jew squats on the windowsill,” or Mr Eugenedies, the déclassé, unsavory Smyrna merchant from *The Waste Land*, who invites the poet to a resort known for its homosexual patrons, no one mentioned Eliot’s bigotry.) So I suspect that it was not the absence in lived experience alone that disabled Wordsworth or Hardy, and in spite of which I enjoyed MacNeice, but the way these texts failed to solicit one’s interest. They were not modern.

Scandalously, I cannot recall reading any poems by Derek Walcott or by any other West Indian, not even by Claude McKay. The names of the post World War II intellectuals certainly were in circulation to anyone who read a little bit among the Sunday arts pages of a newspaper. But did I read their novels and poems in school? Did I read Naipaul, Roger Mais, Andrew Salkey? We did read Achebe and Camara Laye in those days, I remember that, Shakespeare, Arnold Wesker, Shelley. Easy enough to check on the West Indians, but embarrassingly—I can’t say for sure now. What stayed with me, you see, opaquely, were the names on the test, the writings of the British canon. And for the most part these texts were quite dead to me. Everything was disciplined by a moral code, harnessed to a sturdy belief that literature shapes character, or something like that.

II.

In 1981, Walcott published *The Fortunate Traveller*, and a friend gave me a copy. By then I had become involved with literature, particularly with French and Modern British poetry (meaning poetry written by Americans and Irish), Russian and French fiction, the cataclysmic writings coming out of Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century. What a relief that poets have other topics and other ways of writing, I said. I never saw the point telling your reader how happy a flower or a bird makes you. It's time to move on. So it was a delightful shock to encounter the poetry of Modernism.

Because of this interest of mine, I began to wonder about the West Indian poets I did not read in school but whom I had heard of. And Walcott by then had become an international figure, a garlanded world poet, frequenting the company of other world poets. *The Fortunate Traveller* knocked my head sideways. By the time Walcott published this book I had read enough classical and enough canonical English literature to see that he had absorbed and also transfigured the contents of the Western Library. This process is distinctly audible in the earliest books. The young poet performs a feat, and presents much more than the results of an exercise. Still, there is something off-kilter, misplaced and fantastical, in his sincere regard for masterpieces. Take the poem "In a Green Night" (from the 1962 volume of that name), and set to one side the pun on the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Overlook the archaic metaphor "orbs of brass," hosting no "direct perception of the thing" (Pound's phrase), when talking of oranges hanging from a branch. The poem repeats structures of thought and vocabulary from at least two canonical authors to draft a meditation upon the natural cycle of growth and decay, selecting an orange tree—a robustly tropical fruit—to teach the lesson. Shakespeare's Iago, in the famous lines on jealousy, has this to say:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (III, iii, 165-167)

The word *green*, as a metaphysical rather than a psychological condition, uniting perceptible and abstract qualities, is a signal flare in Marvell's pastoral. A line from "Bermudas" furnishes Walcott's title: "He hangs in shades the Orange bright, / Like golden Lamps in a green Night"

(330).² Marvell returns elsewhere to this color. The poet's mind in "The Garden" creates and transcends "other Worlds, and other Seas": "Annihilating all that's made / To a green Thought in a green Shade" (328). Together with this perilous green, the structure of harming while feeding that Iago ascribes to jealousy crops up in "The Mower against Gardens." Luxurious man treats the world as his "green *Seraglio*" (317). He seduces the world to vice, building a garden to enclose the flowers and fields, formerly growing in the open. He replaces nature with alluring artifice:

And a more luscious Earth for them did knead
Which stupefi'd them *while it fed*. (my italics; 316)

Into this cacophony—company—falls Walcott's "green yet aging orange tree" set beneath a "golden sun" that ripens and tarnishes its "orbs of brass." The metrical and lexical imitation of Marvell ("stupefied them while it fed") and Shakespeare ("doth mock / The meat it feeds on") is patent in the fourth line below:

For if by night each golden sun
Burns in a comfortable creed,
By noon harsh fires have begun
To quail those splendours *which they feed*. (my italics; 50)³

But so too is the philosophical attitude characteristic of Wallace Stevens in *Harmonium*, namely, that dying and flourishing are the same event. Stevens writes in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle": "The honey of heaven may or may not come, / But that of earth both comes and goes at once" (15).⁴ Echoing both the idea and the syntax here, Walcott reflects upon the "strange, cyclic chemistry / That dooms and glories her [the orange tree] at once" (50).

² Quotations of Marvell's poems are taken from Louis L. Martz ed., *English Seventeenth-Century Verse* (New York: Norton, 1969).

³ In this essay, I quote from and give page citations for the following: Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1986); "The Muse of History," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1998): 36-64; "An Interview with Derek Walcott" by Edward Hirsch (1977), in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1996): 50-63.

⁴ *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954; rpt. 1989). The word *green* describes the peculiar unconcern of a bird on Sunday morning. In the company of oranges, a significant and allusive detail, the bird's "green freedom" appears:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late

Thus written into the canon, Walcott's poetry never feels quite at ease with the spoken language. A reader's knowledge of English poetry invests his work with literary echoes. The abrupt entry of the extinct mastodon, and arctic glaciers, into "The Flock," published in 1965, ostensibly builds to a metaphor for remote, unrepeatable achievements. Of a piece with the local winter landscape, the "Arctic" once "froze giant minds," the poem says. Not "glaciers of Arctic ideas," or "Arctic thoughts"—or another metaphor that could shift the Arctic into a figurative condition—but, simply:

The dark impartial Arctic,
whose glaciers encased the mastodon,
froze giant minds in marble attitudes. (78)

I have long felt that an explanation of these lines was called for. The poem roots the Arctic in the frame of observable, and documented, discovery. The word "impartial" touches the statement with the slightest of anthropomorphism, but not enough to initiate allegory in advance of the predicate, "froze giant minds." In between the first and third lines we unaccountably learn about the mastodon. Surely the giant minds cannot have roamed the icy terrain as the mastodon once did, nor has the terrain been displaced from the frame of observable geography and acquired the attributes of a figure. Something is missing, a context for the statement, that would explain how one and the same Arctic can be said to act upon a prehistoric creature and on monumental works of thought. Discovering a source for a poem's images has the effect of calming the mind. The poem remains unchanged—no words are added, or taken away. But being able to point to an origin satisfies the wish to understand. Readers of a certain age and background, more acquainted with Victorian verse than we in America are, I like to imagine, would have realized that Tennyson's "The Epic" is Walcott's intertext:

Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the *green freedom* of a cockatoo
Upon a rug, mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice. (my italics; 66-67)

Gesturing towards Marvell, the poem debates the adequacy of paradise in heaven and on earth. The sensuous, utopian island of "Bermudas" was created presumably by God; the earthly paradise of "Sunday Morning" is finally "our perishing own," decked out in "our colors," and unperfected by the hand of a deity.

Why take the style of those heroic times?
For nature brings not back the mastodon,
Nor we those times; and why should any man
Remodel models? (81-82)⁵

Calling Walcott's early poetry from *In a Green Night* a remodeling of models is not unfair. We have seen how he takes over from the canon structures of thought and vocabulary to overwrite the West Indian environment with a literary—English—sensibility. What happens around the mastodon in "The Flock" is something else, more heedless of the model, more willful. He will not tolerate the model's primacy and all but abolishes its traces. He dismembers Tennyson's verse. Nevertheless, he makes it present, as if in some small way to pay his respects to the earlier poet.

As time passes, Walcott acquires a signature—Jameson's word for the conspicuous, unprecedented, individual styles of high modernist literature. He devises a syntax and a store of tropes—especially metaphors that link nature and text—for his distinctive way of seeing things. If one hears *Little Gidding* in the master's soliloquy of "The Hotel Normandie Pool," this does not fix Walcott at the margins of his text. Now this way of seeing and saying, resonant with the major idioms of British and American poetry, has the strange surprising quality of being familiar to me. Much turns on how one explains this familiarity. I mean, not that his poetry expresses a West Indian essence, or a national character. Say rather that he paints a scene with words, swerving from phrase to phrase, so that a West Indian can recognize the scene from his own lived experience. He mixes elaborate and plainer modes of rhetoric. "The Hotel Normandie Pool," from *The Fortunate Traveller*, begins:

Around the cold pool in the metal light
of New Year's morning, I choose one of nine
cast-iron umbrellas set in iron tables
for work and coffee. The first cigarette
triggers the usual fusillade of coughs. (439)

The poem builds a scene at poolside in Trinidad, at the Hotel Normandie. Not in a hurry, the pace of the lines matches the relaxed atmosphere. It is early in the morning still. Re-reading the poem, I still marvel at the semantic instability produced by a few uncanny metaphors, set off

⁵ Tennyson's *Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1971), selected and edited by Robert W. Hill, Jr.

against the plain style: “metal light,” “cigarette / triggers the usual fusillade of coughs.” The sentence stitches together “metal,” “cigarette,” “triggers,” and “coughs”—the iron cylinder of a gun firing—and suggests that morning ensues upon violence, after the revels from the previous night. It’s both an unpremeditated observation, and an unthinkable comparison.

There is also the phrase, “nine / cast-iron umbrellas.” One could probably look into the prevailing building materials in the West Indies of the 1970s and find that cast-iron was much in use then. The word “cast-iron” modifies the word “umbrellas.” Speak the phrase aloud, “cast-iron umbrellas,” and you’ll notice that the vocal movement from “iron” to “umbrellas” is impeded, gathering the stress upon “cast-iron,” where it dwells. The phrase, in this context, sounds like so much that I remember from my own life. Cast-iron umbrellas, noises of a fusillade of gunfire, at a hotel near to water—I know those umbrellas, that poolside.

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Derek Walcott grew up in St. Lucia, in the Eastern Caribbean or the Lesser Antilles, and went to university and spent time in Jamaica on the other side of the archipelago. Memory contains the arc of islands stretched, like the head above the body of a curving snake, just beneath the peninsula of Florida over and down to the coast of South America at Guyana. Think of whales visible towards the horizon as dark humps, sunning themselves in a gigantic arc. It takes longer to fly from Kingston to Port of Spain than it does to fly from Kingston to New York. So when one speaks of the West Indies as a place, one should be willing to explain what that means. And the short explanation is: *Créolité*.

In the 1950s, when Walcott was in his twenties, the anglophone countries joined together to establish the West Indies Federation, a political franchise that in time would secure independence from Britain as an independent state. To West Indians of Walcott’s generation, especially in the Eastern Caribbean, Federation held great promise. A new day was dawning for the West Indies; as a Federation, the islands would be self-governing and comprise a single national economy. Three years into the experiment, conflict arose. Jamaicans were unhappy with the slow pace of departure from the empire. It was also felt that given its size and economic standing, some of the political arrangements were unfair to the country. A referendum on whether to stay or secede was put to the people in 1961. When I traveled to Grenada shortly after the U.S. invasion, an older gentleman, hearing where I was from, recalled sadly the fate of the

Federation. The vote of Jamaica to withdraw from the nascent state precipitated its collapse. Of course I knew of this episode in West Indian history, but I had never heard it spoken of with regret. So many political developments riveted our attention in the intervening decades that the period of Federation was like a mist, a chimera. But this older gentleman on his verandah, one year after the murder of the prime minister, and the landing of U.S. marines, had not forgotten the Jamaican referendum, had always felt that then a chance had been missed. And so, sitting down with a Jamaican visitor, he gently deplored Jamaica's choice, as he must have on other occasions during the two decades since that time.

The brief conversation with the gentleman told me that, elsewhere in the West Indies, it was possible still to feel the absence of a greater pan-Caribbean unity. The failure to sustain a union has economic consequences for a small place such as Grenada or St. Lucia that a larger island does not notice. Walcott's poetry treats this failure. "The Star-Apple Kingdom" castigates the prime ministers who "cut up" the West Indies and sold the islands "at a markup to . . . conglomerates" (390). In the autobiography, he suggests that the collapse of Federation into political disunity is a tell-tale sign of deeper fractures. This diagnosis becomes more understandable if one recognizes how disheartening that collapse was at the time, and how prolonged was the regret. Contemplating vegetable life, roots and leaves of the forest, the poet departs from visual inspection, and envisions the entire span of the archipelago. From *Another Life* (1973)⁶:

here was a life older than geography,
as the leaves of edible roots opened their pages
at the child's last lesson, Africa, heart-shaped,

and the lost Arawak hieroglyphs and signs
were razed from slates by sponges of the rain,
their symbols mixed with lichen,

the archipelago like a broken root,
divided among the tribes . . . (196)

⁶ No doubt much of what I have to say about *Another Life*, a text which continues to astonish me, has been tinged and turned by Edward Baugh's seminal study of that poem, *Derek Walcott: Memory as Vision: Another Life* (London: Longman, 1978).

Reflection upon the idea, creation, and collapse of the West Indies Federation confers the weight of historical fact upon the poem's undated contention: that the territory of the archipelago has been "divided among the tribes" into fragments. An episode that took place within living memory anchors this judgment. But the conditions under diagnosis pertain to an older history: the stanzas suggest that disunity is intrinsic to the region. The foreground shifts from location to location; the reader's attention is summoned by the adverb "here," only to be focused more closely upon "leaves" and "edible roots," which shift their morphology to "pages" containing a "lesson," and finally reveal an image of "Africa," in the shape of a heart. The lines enact a radical discontinuity in thought.

Co-ordinate with the main clause of the first stanza—given equivalent weight to it—the second stanza changes the object of viewing once more. Hieroglyphs displace the image of Africa. But a dislocation also takes place in time. This section of the poem narrates the young poet's quest to learn the details of St. Lucia's countryside. The verb "was" of the first line ("here was a life older than geography") therefore refers to an encounter within the poet's lifetime. But in the succeeding stanza, the time-frame being cited is more ambiguous, seeming to encompass the primordial and continuous past of an epoch that flourished long before the poet arrived to view its signs. And yet the poet takes note of falling rain in the same verbal tense that he uses to record the vegetation. In other words, the syntax of simultaneity conjoins disparate times and places. An observation on nearby plant life ("here was") gives way to a scenario of reading simultaneous with it ("as the leaves . . . opened"), which through the coordinate conjunction and verb tense ("and . . . were razed"), gives way to a simultaneous erasure of ancient hieroglyphs, and ones that in any case, paradoxically, had already been "lost." The "broken root" of the archipelago floats unmoored in time and space away from these events, in the syntax of mere apposition, as if the archipelago were itself an event and not the site where events occur.

Nevertheless, one fact of history, or fact of power, that allows me to call the West Indies a place is to be found in the child's last lesson. Rain erases the hieroglyphs of the first dwellers of the islands even as the book opens and reveals its lesson. The book has an image on its pages, Africa in the shape of a heart. The edible roots belong to the natural surroundings. They comprise a book. But this book, as a book, as a cultural object, cannot be indigenous. Books come from the colonial library. The book is edible, a root that grows in the soil, but as a book, the root teaches a lesson: that one has to coordinate three origins for the West Indies, as it were,

Africa, Europe, and the ground one stands on, the page where hieroglyphs are written or are erased. This triplex pattern repeats across the archipelago (supplemented by arrivals from other continents), occurs in St. Lucia, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, Martinique, and Jamaica, and can be stated briefly as the three origins or sources of culture and sensibility.

The indigenous is a complex of elementary vectors, some from overseas. The language that the colonial masters, the planters, overseers, and tavern keepers, brought with them to the West Indies goes through a process of change—creolization—under pressure from the West African languages brought by the kidnapped labor. The slave masks his speech; he adopts the camouflage of noise to thwart surveillance. To Édouard Glissant, student of Caribbean discourse, the archipelago presents “most vividly” an image of the concept of “Relation.” In fact, as a rendezvous prepared from the “linked histories of peoples,” creolization “approximates” the poetics of Relation: “It is not merely an encounter, a shock . . . , a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and errantry” (33-34).⁷ Active in the mouth of disunity, Creolization spans and harmonizes the archipelago. Walcott probes the spidery depths—rooted and open, free and oceanic—of this creole formation. Of the Spanish settlers:

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. (307)

Compressing centuries into a moment, the poem sums up a bitter and murderous history. “The African acquiesced, / repeated, and changed” the European words—creolized the language and thereby made the West Indies. That process continues, transmitted from generation to generation:

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!

⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000), trans. Betsy Wang.

Sir, fireflies caught in molasses. (308)

Starting from particulars, combining them into new patterns, one gives names to other objects of the visible world. Perception goes on record as a metaphor available only to a native of the place. Lacking fireflies, or lacking molasses, the name-giver from a different milieu turns to his local particulars—the armor, sheath, and sword of a warrior; a bull with pointed horns; a maid carrying water—to map his vision of the heavens.

Dramatically and memorably according to Walcott, creole speech maps earthly surroundings through a process that is inherently metaphoric. As in Plato's *Cratylus*, the name in creole resembles the essential being of the thing to be named. Put in terms of the Saussurean structure of the linguistic sign, the bond between signifier and signified, or word and referent, is not arbitrary but motivated through mimesis. Walcott comments:

The metaphors that one hears from peasants describing a tree, a flower, an insect, anything, were not like the Latin names for those things. . . . Let's say you're looking up at a bird in the sky over St. Lucia and someone says 'ciseau la mer.' Now 'ciseau la mer' means 'scissor of the sea,' and that's much more startling, much more exciting than saying 'martin' or 'tern.' The metaphor is almost calligraphic: when it is pronounced you can almost see it. (Edward Hirsch interview, 1977; 58)

Bird and name-of-bird are joined in a synaesthesia where "ciseau la mer," the bird that flies above the sea, looks like the sound of its name. Set next to metropolitan language, Creole seems to fail as speech: it neglects rules of syntax and pronunciation. Poor and uneducated, Creole speakers mangle language. Set within a theatre of the environment, especially the natural world, Creole intimately connects names and things. The name does not fix a label to the thing so much as recall, or call out again, its visual presence.

Names emerge organically from verbalized perception. Walcott represents this organic emergence as a vocal echo, as if the natural world could speak. The countryside of *Another Life* teems with utterance. Crisscrossing St. Lucia, the young poet adopts the brief of conqueror and botanist, intent on laying claim to the island as home and on recording its geography and natural history. "[W]e swore," he writes,

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 self-pitying inlet mutters in “brackish dialect” (=Creole). The natural world appears to the eye, which is sensitive to color, as a type of fugitive communication: the “ochre track” loses itself in “an unfinished phrase.”

each ochre track seeking some hilltop and
losing itself in an unfinished phrase,
under sand shipyards where the burn-out palms
inverted the design of unrigged schooners,
entering forests, boiling with life,
goyave, corrosol, bois-canot, sapotille.

The forest teems with personal life. The reciprocity of call and response—dynamic, synthetic, mutually reliant, spontaneous yet ceremonial—joins speech to a place, environment to speech, in an oral poetics. The onset of words in italics indicates a change in focal point. Not the trees, but rather the Creole words that name them, move into the foreground of awareness. If signs imitate objects, then taxonomy articulates names as “content,” in Saussure’s thesis, and not only as a table of differences. *Goyave, corrosol, bois-canot, sapotille*—these words at the conclusion of a passage threaded with utterance appear, audibly, to emerge from the forest itself.

Towards the end of the linguistic spectrum where Creole is replaced by forms of metropolitan speech, the situation of trees and men is rather bleak. The shift in linguistic register corresponds to a movement from organicism to artifice. Colonial policy attempted what Eliot deplored, when he said of the British in India: “No man is good enough to have the right to make another over in his own image. The benefits of British rule will soon be lost, but the ill-effects of the disturbance of a native culture by an alien one will remain” (139).⁸ Not a name-giver, in the colonial system of knowledge, the African is given a name; a laborer once more, he pursues a goal—Eliot’s “image”; Walcott’s “what their given sounds resembled”—established by others. The language of geometry would say that trees and men approach the resemblance contained in

⁸ T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego, et al.: Harcourt Brace, 1968).

their given sounds in the way that the curve of a graph approaches a limit asymptotically, getting ever closer but never quite meeting up with it:

the archipelago like a broken root,
divided among the tribes, while trees and men
laboured assiduously, silently to become

whatever their given sounds resembled,
ironwood, logwood-heart, golden apples, cedars,
and were nearly

ironwood, logwood-heart, golden apples, cedars,
men . . . [sic].“ (196)

History throws a canopy of verisimilitude over these lines: the promise of unity through Federation collapses into national factions. This is a dateable event. The remainder of the passage acquires historical reality by association with the initial figure of division. And so a reader says: in the history of the West Indies, trees and men perform such futile labor. Since not yet logwood-heart, they labor to become logwood-heart. Since not yet, or not quite, men, they labor to become men. Their silence attests to effort and sincerity. Until the artifice of labor gives place to the organicism of identity, they remain without voice—dumb, struggling, unappeased, insufficient, and trapped: simulacra. Colonialism presents colonized man with a terrible shadow. In pursuit of the shadow, the West Indian is never self-same; in turning to face the given name, he turns from the environment, and from organic reciprocity, towards artifice and mimicry. Imposed as an external policy, the desire to make over the self turns inward. This is the point to emphasize. West Indians—the middle class, the intellectuals—were complicit in their alienation. They succumbed to the allure of English.

No doubt this is how it was. But after reading Fanon, one wishes for a different account of history—one wishes for the story of anti-colonial resistance. That West Indians chased after an English idea of what, or who, they ought to resemble—this offends progressive thought. A West Indian intellectual of the 1960s and 1970s who had digested C.L.R. James’s history of the Haitian revolution should not so calmly agree that men willfully adopted a colonial standard of self-definition. Walcott, however, repeats himself. “The African,” he writes elsewhere, “acquiesced, / repeated, and changed” the European words. You can see from this passage why

Walcott was once charged with holding a less than satisfactory ideological posture. None of my contemporaries would have written “acquiesced.” Nanny the Maroon, Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle, Marcus Garvey—where in the pages of their struggle does one find acquiescence? Whatever the historical truth, a resolute anti-colonial would have chosen to record a different sequence, surely including the catalogue of revolts on the plantations and the Maroon wars of the 18th century. The word “acquiesced” conjures distasteful notions of African docility.

. . . .

A small detour into history. After Federation fails, after Independence, time accelerates for new-born nation-states. No longer subject to an empire from which they draw political standing and economic support, they must hurry to catch up with the West. They must seek modernity on their own. If, as Fanon writes, culture forms the infrastructure of the nation, then everyone begins to discuss cultural identity. What is the national culture? This means: What is the nation?

By the late 1960s, one compelling answer has been framed. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and the activism of figures such as Walter Rodney and Malcolm X, there develops in the West Indies a powerful movement towards Black cultural nationalism. Some governments—Jamaica, Guyana, for example—swerve to the left, towards an emancipationist agenda dedicated to bettering conditions for the urban and rural poor: “Better must come.” It was not only an economic and educational program. It was also an attempt to abolish class and caste distinctions built upon color. One way to put it is to say that intellectuals in and out of the government wanted to ground the nation in a particular vision of culture and history, with people of African descent—the black masses, to use the political rhetoric of the time—placed at the core of the national society. Slavery as former oppression, neo-colonialism, neo-imperialism as contemporary expressions of the same disabling conditions that obtained in the past: people spoke and wrote much about these matters during my youth.

People also spoke much of the leaders of African anti-colonial nationalism, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenneth Kaunda, and Patrice Lumumba. Jamaicans were concerned with the rise and fall of governments in Latin and Central America; with the friendship with our neighbor in Cuba, Fidel Castro; with the wars in Namibia, Mozambique, and Angola; and with the almost daily horrors of apartheid South Africa. Steve Biko died in police custody in 1977.

Samora Machel, fresh from the wars in Mozambique, visited Jamaica wearing battle fatigues, and I went to hear him speak. Mozambique! In those years of the 1970s, Africa, not Europe, Cuba not the United States, provided models for building the nation. The government, some say despotism, of Grenada fell to socialists in 1979.

Among other critiques, Walcott reacted strongly to two aspects of this upheaval in cultural identity: first, to what he denounced in a 1974 essay as the “literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves” (“Muse” 37); and second, to a tutorial impulse seeking to rehabilitate the image of blackness—the slogan “black is beautiful” can stand here for that project—grounding West Indian identity in blackness, and blackness in turn in Africanity. Effectively, culture in the West Indies was to be grasped as black, which meant that the complexities of the multi-ethnic societies in the region would be elided.

Taking these points in reverse order, one can understand Walcott’s objections to the discourse of blackness as a reaction against—and a refusal of—*any* reification of identity, instead of as a denial of the predominant African share in West Indian origins. The poem “Names” (1976) gestures towards this position. Myth locates racial origins in the cry of a terrible vowel, in the sound of the first person singular.

A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
and my race began like the osprey
with that cry,
that terrible vowel,
that I!

The race begins with an act of individuation, in a vowel sound that echoes the final phoneme of the osprey’s cry. Having signaled its beginnings, the race of myth is content to abandon the usual preoccupations with identity associated with naming:

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.⁹ (306)

Writing the name takes place idly, an ordinary act of self-definition, but the imprint is ephemeral, and the sea erases it. The cycle of naming and oblivion follows the rhythms of the tides; upon the palimpsest of the sand, no name escapes erosion, but the writer accepts this loss with indifference. Erasure marks a return of self to elementary rhythms, without alphabet or race.

To denounce the literature of revenge is not to be ignorant of the horrors of the slave trade, and to idealize nonchalance towards identity is not to sanitize the past. Walcott holds intricately phrased, ambiguous views on the place of Africa in West Indian origins. Where the historian, seduced by the muse of fact into telling of crimes, fails to hear into the past, the “child without history” transcends the rupture of the middle passage and hears far more. The child is superior to the adult scholar:

that child who puts the shell's howl to his ear,
hears nothing, hears everything
that the historian cannot hear, the howls
of all the races that crossed the water
the howl of grandfathers drowned
in that intricately swivelled Babel,
hears the fellaheen, the Madrasi, the Mandingo, the Ashanti,
yes, and hears also the echoing green fissures of Canton,
and thousands without longing for this other shore
by the mud tablets of the Indian provinces . . . (285)

The crimes of the past ought not to shackle the imagination. Indeed, the effort of the West Indian poet to “say who he is,” a move to utterance that “takes a long time,” solicits myth rather than history, and is an encounter with natural powers, an environment teeming with signs (Interview 52). The child's mythopoeic, catholic imagination re-materializes the distinct sounds of “all the races that crossed the water”: races from West Africa, India, and China. Writing the names of the nations mourns their losses and pays homage to them. The child does not neglect the plural ethnic and continental reach of the descendants that people the region. Spelled out in the *Antilles*, his Nobel lecture, Walcott's West Indies is multiply sourced and scored.

⁹ This indifference to erasure had long puzzled me. When Walcott visited Georgetown in the spring of 2005, he was asked about the poem by a student. My reading here is indebted to Walcott's response.

The colonial encounter above all, however, lies at the origin of the modern West Indies, and furnishes material for a founding myth. Resident from Guyana to Jamaica at the time of Columbus's voyages, the Amerindians left behind no written records. Where one might expect to discover their stories, only "Blank pages turn in the wind" according to the poem "Origins" (11), the title of which signals a thematic pre-occupation that continues through poems such as "Crusoe's Island," "Crusoe's Journal," "Names," "The Schooner *Flight*," and *Omeros*. If the West Indies does have a founding literary document, it is written not by an indigene or an African, but by a metropolitan Englishman. Starting from this observation, the West Indian poet builds into that story a point of view that represents the others of the encounter. In 1965, *The Castaway and Other Poems* appears in print. This volume contains two poems anointing Robinson Crusoe as the archetype of West Indian man, and Defoe's novel as the creation story and originary "timbers" later writers will build upon: "our first book, our profane Genesis" (92). The poet's relationship to Crusoe's journals is one of intimacy. From their daily use—so one might daily read the Bible—he learns how to make a new language:

So from this house
that faces nothing but the sea, his journals
assume a household use;
we learn to shape from them, where nothing was
the language of a race. (94)

In an older usage, "race" means a collection of people living over an extended span of time in the same place. Crusoe's journals furnish the means for the creation of a language for the West Indian "race," in this older sense. Was there no language before this? Were we dumb before English settlers—missionary or castaway—taught us to speak? In the dream of colonial discourse, the answer to these questions is well known: No, there was not; and, Yes, you were. Indeed, Walcott's poem not only confirms the debt owed to the English document but also construes an attitude of intimacy towards this material. The journals are a cherished household object, a familiar and daily companion. The poet admits into his inner circle a book that is nothing if not a fantasy of imperial conquest. The Amerindian whom Crusoe rescues, it will be recalled, right away prostrates himself and places his head beneath Crusoe's foot; he has no name we know of except the one Crusoe bestows upon him; and among the first English words

he learns is that of *master*, meant to signify his benefactor. Friday is the very type of the docile slave.

For all of that, one cannot say that Walcott accepts uncritically the benefaction of England in “Crusoe’s Journal.” In recalling Friday’s education and religious conversion, he laces with irony the tutelary process by which savages acquire (a European) language. The result is that in his retelling the voice that speaks as mimicry is doubled and interrupts the finality of the discourse that sanctions colonization, and that reproduces history as myth—the civilizing mission—in the first place. He compares Crusoe to Columbus:

like Christofer he bears
in speech mnemonic as a missionary’s
the Word to savages,
its shape an earthen, water-bearing vessel’s
whose sprinkling alters us
into Good Fridays who recite His praise,
parroting our master’s
style and voice, we make his language ours,
converted cannibals
we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ. (93)

Deciding which parts of this passage to attribute to the poet’s own assessment, and which parts to call borrowed or parodied, is scarcely possible. The hermeneutic ground upon which a reader depends is a fluctuating terrain. Walcott implies or asserts: I was a savage when master brought the Word to me; I acted like a bird that lacks human intelligence; I was once a pagan or unconverted cannibal, but now I am a Christian cannibal. Surely, a reader says, Walcott means to be satiric. There is bitterness here, a desire to obliterate English pretensions. In orderly, well-regulated verse, he visits scorn upon “our” teachers (Columbus, Crusoe, Defoe—“our” masters); their lessons (how to speak, the Christian doctrine); the method of acquiring knowledge (mimicry); and even the classes of being to which he is restricted (savage, parrot, slave, cannibal). The exercise of linguistic violence upon the savage produces no moral elevation. But he also says—and, I suggest, throws out the possibility that the master’s conduct might be redeemed—: “we make his language ours.” This statement is consistent with the process described later in the poem of learning from the journals to “shape” “the language of a race.” One and the same voice speaks both statements affirmatively. The bulk of the passage is so

contemptuous of missionary assumptions—the phrase “Good Fridays” offends no less than “Good Negroes”—that a reader is tempted to conclude, nonetheless, that the speaker disowns what he asserts; that he describes himself as seen through missionary eyes and in the same verbal gesture ridicules their (his) vision.

What remains after such sifting (shifting) reflections is the blunt perception that no alternative narrative of self-fashioning is on offer. One might complain of the word “parroting,” and replace it with the Latin *imitans*; or press the point that not all others are cannibals. The structure of the encounter—the vector of cultural power from here to there, teacher to pupil, master to slave, Englishman to savage—remains central to the myth of origins, and is left undisplaced. Trapped inside a scenario he grasps as offensive to dignity, the poet does not acquiesce to the narrative of servile imitation. Rather, he lashes out. Something of Caliban’s implacable resentment animates the irony, and colors his words with violence. After all, if obedient to doctrine, the savage is still a converted *cannibal*, having swapped one kind of flesh for another.

Whatever the claims and counter-claims of the post-independence era, which I will not rehearse further, the bitterness of the controversy over cultural authenticity chars the pages of his autobiography. Picking it up in chapter four, in the plot of the story, the poet has recently learned that Harry Simmonds, his boyhood mentor, one “master” in a text that has several, has just committed suicide, alone and in a remote part of the island.

And perhaps, master, you saw early
what brotherhood means among the spawn of slaves
hassling for return trips on the middle passage,
spitting on their own poets . . . (265)

The medusa of slavery transfixes the demagogue; and the fixation on history breeds exhibitionism, a victim ideology. Worse, people spit on their own poets.

Those who peel from, from their own leprous flesh, their names,
who chafe and nurture the scars of rusted chains,
like primates favouring scabs, those who charge tickets
for another free ride on the middle passage,
those who explain to the peasant why he is African . . . (269)

To call your contemporaries lepers and monkeys, men who chafe as they narcissistically display their sores from manacles—well, that’s rather provocative. My generation was too young to stray into the error of neo-colonialism. That quarrel belongs to someone else’s past. The difference in generational attitudes towards the colonial period is quite marked, marks as it were a shift in sensibility in progress during those years, and I will return to it later in this essay.

III.

When, in 1981, a friend gave me the first hardcover edition of Walcott’s *The Fortunate Traveller*, I knew nothing of his earlier work; the controversy had not come to my notice; and *Créolité* was something I lived without needing to analyze. The linguists, anthropologists, and historians had written books about the West Indies that I had not read, and I did not need these texts to read Walcott. The fortunate poet travels outside the West Indies, to New York where I was then living, to a store in Virginia where he collects change from the cashier. The poems have the strong flavor of New England, the milieu of Melville and Robert Lowell which I had read about and visited, suggestions of the Aegean islands that I, too, romanticized from Greek poetry. The poet, as a “colonial upstart,” as “a single, circling, homeless satellite,” roams about the north and the south. Small details summon up whole cities and even epochs: “Beetle-back taxi from Heathrow to my flat,” evoking the streets of cosmopolitan London (458); or “the fountains trot like percherons round the Met, / clip, clop, clip, clop in Belle Epoque Manhattan,” recreating an image from the Gilded Age (403). The trajectory of Walcott’s generation out of the West Indies and into the metropolitan centers of the North is evident in the collection.

The poem “North and South” anchors the book for me. Here, the mind operates on the large scale and the small. The upstart at the end of an empire re-situates the empires of the past in their ruin and superimposes one empire upon the place of another. Carthage, which was destroyed by Rome, the British empire in its death-throes, Tyre and Sidon, cities conquered by Alexander, and Alexandria itself named for the Macedonian appear in procession as if through “a glass-bottom boat,” the pane of glass in the bottom of a fishing boat acting as a sort of trans-historical television screen.

And it may be a childish revenge

at the presumption of empires to hear the worm
gnawing their solemn columns into coral,
to snorkel over Atlantis, to see, through a mask,
Sidon up to its windows in sand, Tyre, Alexandria,
with their wavering seaweed spires through a glass-bottom boat,
and to but porous fragments of the Parthenon
from a fisherman in Tobago, but the fear exists,
Delenda est Carthago on the rose horizon . . . (405)

The imagination distorts and alchemizes world-historical cities so that they draw near to our everyday experience in their ruin: the fisherman finds a fragment of Periclean Athens caught up in his fishing net.

Later, the location of speech swerves abruptly from New York in winter (“this heart of darkness”) to the West Indies. The reader witnesses a scene, and a way of life, that I felt would be recognizable to any West Indian:

I am thinking of an exile farther than any country.
And in this heart of darkness, I cannot believe
they are now talking over palings by the doddering
banana fences, or that seas can be warm. (406)

Memory displaces the present fact: people talk over palings with the warm sea nearby. Some writers need only a line or two to sketch a way of life. It is an inimitable talent, flowering from an aptitude for parsing the mesh of a culture. Attention can be trained, and language ability can be cultivated, both up to a point. But how can you train someone to adjust words to stored perceptions, to write down the verbal form of a visual and intellectual event? In these three lines, I hear a voice whose accents infiltrate and coalesce in the collision of bumpy sounds, “doddering banana fences,” and I see a way of life, both at a single moment and as it persists through time, remote as it is from the poet’s own upstart cosmopolitanism.

These lines shocked me. They still shock me. That one should put “banana” into a poem that meditates upon the “guttural death rattle of empires”—that is to mix the very high with the very humble. Personal mobility, cheap modes of communication, mean that the world out there is not so remote. (Even more so today: in coastal Jamaica, fishermen carry as many as three cellphones when they go out to sea.) Empire has always had the means of building far-flung networks to project power. With the nuclear bomb, however, everyone is implicated, and all at

once, in the conduct of an empire's war. Like everybody else, like the women by the fence, the "colonial upstart" waits for apocalypse:

and the side streets of Manhattan of sown with salt,
as those in the North all wait for that white glare
of the white rose of inferno, all the world's capitals.

The scale of an empire, of all the world's capitals, and the scale of a banana, of the small island, apparently have to do with each other. The women talking by the fences are rooted in the itinerant creole mind that encompasses both scales; they help to root that mind somewhere. They mean something by their talk, and their posture; their experience is also part of what matters.

.

It is not incidental that Walcott chooses the "calligraphic" phrase "ciseau la mer" to explain the mechanics of naming in creole speech. In the first place, metaphors of startling visibility are Walcott's signature poetic device. He is a painter after all. And like a canvas placed in just this spot, here, in front of a coconut tree, Walcott's images—sometimes explicitly—give the reader a place to stand, a point of view from which to look out upon houses and the sea. The beginning of *Another Life* positions the reader in front of a book: "Verandahs, where the pages of the sea / are a book left open by an absent master / in the middle of another life" (145). A painter wishes to capture a moment in time. Walcott wishes to craft kinetic metaphors that elongate the instant, and that set the visible world into motion, focused through active verbs (the italics are my own): "over the untroubled ocean the moon / will always *swing* its *lantern* / and evening *fold* the *pages* of the sea" (293). The verb "swing" looks ahead to "lantern" and the verb "fold" looks ahead to "pages." The figurative noun will precede the verb and also follow it: "I watched the *vowels curl* from the *tongue* of the carpenter's plane" and "*tongues* of shavings *coil* from the moving *pen*" (216). He writes extended metaphors rather than extended similes, the first elements of the trope being put into place long before the *dénouement*. Time passes in his metaphors. The poem "The Flocks" (*The Castaway*) sets up a comparison between migrating birds and arrows fired by a longbow. Winter draws the bowstring:

The grip of winter tightening, its thinned

volleys of blue-wing teal and mallard fly
from longbows of reeds bent by the wind,
arrows of yearning for our different sky.

The winter scene is then transposed to the mind. The migrating birds re-appear as a metaphor for poetic images; and the arrows are abstracted into the violence with which these images break into consciousness:

I

awoke this sunrise to a violence
of images migrating from the mind. (77)

Images are violent because they migrate from the mind without the poet's intervention: they overcome, or bypass, his will. Walcott's metaphors are violent in another sense. They conjoin in identity disparate objects that have almost no common attributes, except as bestowed by the metaphor: "a plane smoothing down a piece of wood" and "speech"; things that occur at widely disparate rates of speed: "intensifying cold in wintertime" and "gripping and firing a longbow"; and things of vastly different sizes, "archipelago" and "root."

Taking a wider view, one could say that the phrase "ciseau la mer," as a metaphor, emblemizes a metaphoric process in Walcott's poetry that aims to conjoin in identity not only disparate objects of perception such as "cigarette" and "trigger," or "sea" and "book," but to conjoin disparate places, different parts of the world. In the phrase "ciseau la mer," Europe and Africa meet in St. Lucia. From this perspective, painting would limit Walcott's reach—you paint what's in front of you—whereas metaphor expands the horizons of perception beyond the immediate physical spaces available to the senses. Ironically, it was his failure—or so he puts it—as a painter that revealed more patently his aptitude and appetite for metaphor. This aptitude does not translate over to painting:

Where did I fail? I could draw,
I was disciplined, humble, I rendered
the visible world that I saw
exactly, yet it hindered me . . .

.....
. . . I lived in a different gift,
its element metaphor
while Gregorias would draw

with the linear elation of an eel
one muscle in one thought . . . (200-201)

The life lived in metaphor: “Gregorias would draw / with the linear elation of an eel.” To compare drawing to the swimming of an eel! Dr. Johnson would object: incongruous ideas are yoked together by violence, he would thunder. In effect, one could respond: precisely. The poet crafts originality by doing violence to the language.

In order to add the poetry of the Antilles to a literature with its own long history and its durable, memorable, tradition of poetry—Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper,” Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” Arnold’s “Dover Beach”—the poet has to knock things about; he must write against the grain of the poetry stored up in the canon, especially if he has been schooled in the tradition of Romanticism and wishes, in turn, to engage West Indian “nature.” The West Indian writer confronts an inertia in laying down the traditional metrical line. To keep the line moving calls for stubbornness, a decision to be violent, to be rough with the melody.

Under our grinding heel
the island burst to a crushed
odour of *hogplums*, acrid, exuding
a memory stronger than *madeleines*. (218; my italics)

Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* begins with a trivial episode: the narrator eats a *madeleine*, a common French pastry served with tea, and the taste of the pastry opens a doorway into the detailed recollections of his life. The hogplum, a common fruit in the West Indies, ripens, falls, and rots in abundance in the countryside. The strong scent of the plums makes the mouth water and clings to the memory of one’s youth. The hogplum stands in for Proust’s *aide-memoire*; the audacity of yoking the word *hogplum* to the syntax of poetry that speaks of *madeleines*—this is what I want to call attention to. The line “a memory stronger than madeleines” can be scanned as three successive dactyls, the metrical pattern of the Homeric epics: *memory stronger than madeleines*. It is literally a classical line, mellifluous, and replete with nostalgia. But there is that earlier phrase, “odour of hogplums, acrid, exuding,” with the stresses jammed together, *hogplums*, *acrid*, and the roughness of the *d* and *g* sounds, plus the word “hogplums” itself, occupying the line like a weed, a bastard child. If you’ve trained your

ear on Dylan Thomas and Hardy, to write “hogplums” is to perpetrate an ugliness, to rip into the tissue of sounds that constitute the metrical fabric of the north. And then to let the line stand, and further to stress the harshness through a clot of stresses and consonants, this says that you are prepared to yoke incongruities together, by violence if necessary, to make the poem speak of a tropical place.

. . . .

Walcott’s vision of that place, as tender as it is, reveals a history of horror. History marks the site of a mass grave. And even memory cannot survive this holocaust. The lost populations of the plantation are memorialized only in the unrecorded, amnesiac, generations of vegetation. From *Another Life*:

the *bois-canot* responded to its echo,
when the axe spoke, weeds ran up to the knee
like bastard children, hiding in their names

whole generations died, unchristened,
growths hidden in green darkness, forests
of history thickening with amnesia . . . (195)

Weeds and bastard children belong to the same family. They both grow in the wild. If the forest teems, and if generations are born and die, no memorial marks their passing. The forest forgets its ancestral populations. Nothing can be known of them. The poet glimpses an irretrievable past, whitened over with amnesia. The open book of the sea cannot help, for the sea:

brings towards us, again and again, in beaten scrolls,
nothing, then nothing,
and then nothing. (287)

These lines on the sea, and on the generations, are so bleak that a reader searches for a way around them. What sort of nothing does the sea bring? One says something like the following: wave generates wave, as growth generates growth. As parts of a cycle, withering and dying do not mark a final end. In the “Muse of History,” Walcott writes, paradoxically: “In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World” (39). Paradoxically,

not only because that which is forgotten cannot be written as history, but because his own poetry refutes this thesis, contains much that did not surrender to amnesia—everything that makes creole culture vital. Indeed, forgetting is integral to generation. As Glissant says:

the Creole language has [an] internal obligation: to renew itself in every instance on the basis of a series of forgettings. Forgetting, that is, integration, of what it starts from: the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other; the nostalgia, finally, for the Caribbean remains of these. (69)

The women talking over palings by the doddering banana fences are replete with memory. Or, as Walcott says of the forest, filled with a life “older than geography,” that is, older than the charts of colonial territories prepared in London and summarized in the geography textbooks of the New World.

IV.

As you can probably tell by now, I’ve been reading Walcott backwards, from *The Fortunate Traveller*, to *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, *Sea Grapes*, *Another Life*, *The Gulf*, *The Castaway*, and so on. If one adds to these the books published since 1981, *Midsummer*, *The Arkansas Testament*, *Omeros*, *The Odyssey*, *Tiepolo’s Hound*, *The Prodigal*, and the collections of plays, interviews, and essays, then Walcott’s oeuvre might be said to comprise a small library. Reading the English library, he has written a West Indian library. Libraries run in the family. His father owned a “small blue library / of reproductions” from the old masters that he studied assiduously (202). The library dwells at the center of the house and the youth has free access to it. But elsewhere, on other pages of the autobiography, it’s not so simple. Signs posted in the house of literature say: do not touch:

I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy,
filched as the slum child stole,
as the young slave appropriated
those heirlooms temptingly left
with the Victorian homilies of *Noli tangere*. (219)

The house of literature barred to the slum-child, the heirlooms appropriated by the slave, who ignores the Latin injunction *Noli tangere*—these make for attractive metaphors, politically. They

say that West Indian poetry springs from anti-colonial disobedience. The bastard transgresses the Law; the slave violates the sanctified border between the master and himself.

Noticing the adjective “Victorian,” however, one might turn to ask about the temporal relationship between the library written by Walcott and the library of heirloom books from the days of empire. Born in 1930, about three decades after the death of Victoria Regina—but let me first quote another passage from “North and South” to fix in your mind the curious mixture of a lingering imperial past joined to a bustling West Indian present. Like the word “dialect,” “patois” gives another name for creole speech:

How far I am from those cacophonous seaports
built round the single exclamation of one statue
of Victoria Regina! There vultures shift on the roof
of the red iron market, whose patois
is brittle as slate . . . (406-407)

Where quiet reigns in the mansion and in the library, cacophony reigns at the seaport, and in the midst of this noise, built perhaps on a pedestal within a round-a-bout, stands the statue of Queen Victoria.

Existence as colonies of England had the effect of slowing down time in the West Indies. Still in the 1960s, with each visit from a member of the royal family, on a tour of England’s (former) dominions and territories, the pageantry of empire would revive and a lineage dating within living memory back to the Victorian era would become conspicuous. I remember this. The Governor General embodied this imperial lineage. An imposing spectacle, wearing a princely uniform, bemedalled, sashed, and hatted, this Jamaican was essential to the ceremonial parade of national affairs. Appointed by the queen to be her royal envoy (he was, in actuality, the choice of the Jamaican government), the Governor General received the knighthood, and though lacking in executive power was the one who on the radio formally declared Parliament in session and delivered the “Throne Speech” each year. Photographs showed him receiving the newly-elected prime minister, foreign envoys, and visiting heads of state at Vale Royal, his residential manor fronted by white columns and acres of a manicured lawn. All cabinet ministers were formally appointed by him. I remember this. The reach of imperial influence, confirmed in the names of the streets, was not an abstraction. The monarchy was written onto the spaces of the

city. Queen's Street, King's Street, Victoria Park, Prince Albert this or that. West Indians walked, shopped, set up market stalls, drove automobiles, congregated, and went to work in places with names such as these. The streets around the harbor in Kingston and the churches, government offices, and stores in that quarter had about them an antiquated air, as if some slow drama from the previous century refused to close. My great grandmother, born in the 1880s, lived in our house when I was growing up. *Her* grandmother had been a slave.

Increasingly, through the decade of the 1970s, Jamaica changed into a violent place. Certainly, the colonial West Indies had long been vortices of extreme cruelty and barbarism. In my own lifetime, slums arose in the city with their own cycle and circle of violence, their bastard children picking through rubbish dingles for bottles to sell. Gunmen aligned with political parties come from these slums: they not only kill each other, they threaten political rallies, generally run amok. Bob Marley organizes a peace concert that brings the political leaders onto the stage to shake hands. They promise to end the violence. The violence escalates. The upper middle classes move to Miami. The economy goes bust. This is only part of the story. As a society, Jamaica had reoriented its horizon away from Europe and England and towards other parts of the world. We lived through a period of promise that was alive with music, the reforms of democratic socialism, new world alliances, the causes of self-determination and human rights, and we lived through a period of intense violence. Foreign and local affairs preoccupied us, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean: not England.

I'm trying to get at a generational gulf—an abyss, really—that separates the people of my generation from those West Indians born in the vicinity of 1930, a little before or a little after, the generation of Walcott and many other illustrious writers: the intellectuals of the Caribbean Artists Movement, let us say. The generation of my parents and their siblings. And this gulf has to do with the meaning and force of England. A stray memory sometimes speaks to me of an English king “killed by an arrow while hunting.” I can't recall which king it was, and it is not that disturbing to have this phrase mingled with my half-awake dreams at night. When I was a boy, the elementary school history book, resembling nothing so much as a late Medieval chronicle, summarized the reigns of English monarchs, enclosed within their dates, starting from William the Conqueror. This was to be our history, and it is why I remember the fragment about the dead king. Step back to an much earlier epoch in the West Indies, however. C.L.R. James, the Trinidadian Marxist, used to lecture in Port of Spain on Wordsworth in the 1920s. Of this period

in his life, James writes: “I was British, I knew best the British way of life” (152).¹⁰ And now bring the timeline forward by a generation, from James to Walcott. What do we find? Born three decades after Victoria’s death, Walcott writes that he and his friends were “orphans of the nineteenth century / sedulous to the morals of a style” that pervaded the school and household—they were “Victoria’s orphans” (219). They lived in a Victorian era.

When World War II ended in the technological break through to Inferno at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Walcott would have been 15; and when Jamaica got its independence from England, he would have been 32 and an adult. Across the world of English empire, soldiers lowered the Union Jack. Statesmen re-stitched the map of the world into a coat of many colors. These were momentous events: “as a sun, tired of empire, declined” (*Another Life* 148). But Walcott’s memories of his youth, susceptible to the acrid odour of hogplums, have been set into place long before, long before decolonization begins in the West Indies and Africa.

V.

Because Walcott’s poetry is so compelling to me, and because I’ve re-read it for many years, I’m conscious of an area that remains opaque, out-of-focus, strange—a patch of confusion that re-reading, by itself, cannot eliminate. Edward Hirsch interviews Walcott in 1977. Here is an excerpt from the interview that tells of the role of library and teachers in the formation of a child’s self-confidence. And that expresses a doubt, an adult shift in the sense of his debt to the heritage:

Q: . . . several of your early poems seem to reflect the English literary tradition. Does that matter?

A: It was the way I began. I lived on a very small island [St. Lucia] with a good library and fantastic teachers who made world literature accessible to me from a very early age, and who treated me with remarkable familiarity. . . . The availability of books and intelligent conversation gave me enough confidence to be who I was. . . .

. . . I also felt it was a privilege to grow up as an English colonial child because politically and culturally the British heritage was supposed to be mine. It was no problem for me to feel that since I was writing in English, I was in tune with the growth of the language. I was a contemporary of anyone writing in English anywhere in the world. . . . (52-53).

¹⁰ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangsters, and London, England: Hutchinson, 1963).

Now in that trivial ambiguous word “supposed”—“politically and culturally the British heritage was supposed to be mine”—I fancy to myself that I hear a note of disillusion. It was supposed to be mine but things turned out quite the other way. It was not mine. Or, it was mine but in a disturbing, complicated way. Early on in *Another Life*, we find a startling self-portrait:

The dream
of reason had produced its monster:
a prodigy of the wrong age and colour. (145)

The good library on the small island holds the heritage, the dream of reason: Europe’s dream, Prospero’s dream, out of the dark backward and abysm of time, gone awry in the enslavement of Caliban; Victor Frankenstein’s dream of reason fulfilled in the rage of his monster assembled from corpses. In being a dream, in being able to dream itself, doesn’t reason already contain the seed of its opposite: irrationality, monstrosity? The logic of the dream, of the library, plays out in St. Lucia as an error: a prodigy—in the Latin, another name would be *monstrum*—of the wrong age and color. Not the age of Enlightenment, and not the color of the men of the Enlightenment. This error is not one that West Indians of my generation had the privilege of being victimized by. Not having grown up inside the colonial embrace, we did not suppose that the British heritage was ever ours—and more, insofar as we were concerned with things like heritage, it was the heritage of resistance, struggle, revolt, the themes of so many popular reggae songs, that we thought about: the heritage of black people.

Three points of reference: The poet Claude McKay, an anti-imperial communist, a speaker at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern held in Moscow in 1922, once wrote in his dialect verse that he had a longing in his heart “to view de homeland England.” I have already mentioned James’s affirmation: “I was British.” A signal partisan of West Indian nationalism, James makes this observation without qualification or irony. The Guyanese novelist George Lamming notes that West Indians, in the period after World War II, would think of going to England as going to the Mother Country. I find such statements alarming, completely baffling. They speak of a lost world—and not a world recorded in academic criticism and critical theory—a psychic world of individuals educated in a certain way, tutored through a host of messages—traditions—to think of England as a motherland, as a “homeland” from which they have been separated as from a cherished locale of their childhoods.

My mother and I spoke recently about this attachment. She recalled that her teachers had been from England, that they were English nuns; the pupils knew and daily sang “Rule Britannia” and “God Save the King”; they read, exclusively, books by English writers, studied Latin—“the lovely Latin lost to all our schools,” Walcott calls it (“Hotel Normandie,” 442). They learnt English history, in detail, starting from 1066. My mother was raised to be English: to speak English properly, to have the social manners and tastes of the English: empire bounded the horizon of her identity. My mother, my aunts, they love the English—all things English. It would be churlish to accuse such a love, formed in their early schooldays, as being a mistaken location of their proper (postcolonial) identities. A false consciousness of their social position. A misplaced allegiance to masters. Theirs is not an ignorant love. They know that their education, the promise of being English, belongs to another time, almost to another life. They understand the crime that was the English plantation system in the West Indies. They know all about deadly color prejudice, much more than I do since they suffered under it—the contempt of colonial officials, the insults from the nuns at school, the belief that figures of authority (church ministers, for example) should not be “too black.” None of it makes a difference because the radiance of England shines from childhood memory, ready to become active at the taste of a *madeleine*.

What should have been obvious to me is that you cannot endure an educational program designed to raise subjects of the empire and to possess your allegiance so long as the empire shall last, and remain indifferent, in the alert text of your affections, to England and the English people. “I still have a subliminal fear of Europe,” Walcott says in 1977. Some colonials, like Michael Ondaatje’s character Kip in *The English Patient*, must even experience England as a kind of erotic grasp, and the struggle that follows upon disillusionment must be violent indeed. What Walcott’s generation called “mimicry,” so much discussed in the 1960s, one might characterize as the result of a seduction that accompanies the press of power and that makes it tolerable for a while.

VI.

Put in this way—that empire garrisons the borders of identity—I can read with new eyes an extraordinarily dramatic passage from the essay “The Muse of History,” first published in 1974. I would like to close by drawing your attention to it. Out of the polemic against the obsession with manacles and with black power motifs, suddenly Walcott pivots and grapples with a way to

reformulate tradition. I imagine that he is pressed to make this move because, having criticized the aesthetic of recrimination, he must now evade the bayonet that would immobilize him as a conservative, or neo-colonialist, wishing to retain the pre-Independence status quo of anglophilia—that is to say, to preserve the hegemony and privilege of the (white) literary tradition into which he has been welcomed. He writes:

I do not know if one poet is indebted to the other, but whatever the bibliographical truth is, one acknowledges not an exchange of influences, but the tidal advance of the metropolitan language, of its empire, if you like, which carries simultaneously, fed by such strong colonial tributaries, poets of such different beliefs as Rimbaud, Char, Claudel, Perse, and Césaire. It is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes. We continue to categorize these poets by the wrong process, that is, by history. (50-51)

Notice the misleading and defiant gesture in the throw-away phrase, “of its empire, if you like.” The phrase is defiant in that it implies: I’m not afraid to identify poetry with the expansion of an empire. The phrase misleads by appearing to concede a point. Though I would not have put it so myself, I can still accept your word “empire.” You’ll say that I meant empire in any case. But then, having disowned the word, or owned up to it in order to defy his adversaries, Walcott goes on to elaborate upon the metaphor, and in the end it becomes integral to his critical description of the relationship between poet and language, poetry and power. The great poet, whatever his race, feeds the ocean of metropolitan language in its tidal advance. This language flows as an empire—it is “the empire,” he declares.

As if in dialogue with the essay, the poem “North and South” takes up this topic of empire again. But here, the “colonial upstart” spells out a distinction between empire and language on moral grounds. Empires, in their “presumption,” bring death into the world: the Roman annihilation of Carthage, or later in the poem, the Nazi Reich’s extermination of the Jews. Therefore, he says, “It’s good that everything’s gone, except their language, / which is everything” (405). The poem re-states the position that the English language is what matters, but without saying that “language, which is everything” “is the empire.”

The governor, police inspector, schoolmaster—they have returned home. Now is the time, presumably, to displace the colonial ideology—that is, to dismantle the hierarchy of master and slave, and to reject the cultivation of mimicry—and also to rethink the social function of the

now ex-colonial poet. Walcott's poetry exposes and explodes that ideology; this was one of his tasks, and it is a great part of his legacy. How does he rethink the function of the poet? In the "The Muse of History," he exchanges the places of subaltern and prince, while transposing empire from territory to language, retaining an empire that the poet sustains and replenishes.

Maddening, strange reversals these are that do not break free from empire—that bestow upon the poet the symbolic prestige of an imperial prince. West Indian poetry owes a debt to the empire for language. Yes, but there must be other ways of grasping the poet's relationship to English other than through the metaphor of an empire. Why not the metaphor of a garden, or a forest? Can't speech get past the borders of empire? Why choose this particular metaphor? And perhaps the answer to such tumbling questions lies with the meaning and force of England for that generation, born about 1930.