

DEREK WALCOTT "THE MUSE OF HISTORY" (1974)

Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean. Ed. Orde Coombs. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1974. 1-27.

I

Here, Walcott argues that the "common experience of the New World . . . is colonialism" (1). This is true even for those whose "veneration of the Old is read as the idolatry of the mestizo" (1). Such writers remind us, Walcott argues, though they too are "victims of tradition" (1), "of our great debt to the great dead" (1) and that "those who break a tradition first hold it in awe" (1). Arguing that "they have gone past the confrontation of history" (2), Walcott suggests that we owe such thinkers more than "those who wrestle with that past" (1): for

they know that by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it, that revolutionary literature is a filial impulse, and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor. (1)

When they call themselves "classicists" (1) and "pretend an indifference to change" (1), it is with an "irony as true of the colonial anguish as the fury of the radical" (2).

Arguing that these classicists' "sense of the past is of a timeless, yet habitable moment" (1), Walcott contends that these writers

reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory. Their philosophy, based on contempt for historic time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old. (2)

Their "vision of man" (2) is "elementary, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past. Walcott offers a philosophy of history: 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, . . . and that everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim. (2)

Hence, the famous claim that

servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos. (2)

This is the "revolutionary spirit at its deepest" (3). Rejecting that "shame and awe of history" (2) on the part of poets who "think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia" (2), Walcott asserts that the "truly tough aesthetic of the new world" (2), by contrast, "neither explains nor forgives history" (2) and "refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force" (2).

Walcott argues here that the “great poets of the New World” (2), such as Whitman or Neruda, possess an “Adamic” (3) “vision of man in the New World” (3) as one “capable of enormous wonder” (3). Having “paid his accounts to Greece and Rome” (3), he “walks in a world without monuments and ruins” (3) and wary of the “fearful magnet of older civilisations” (3).

III

Walcott contends that those who see the “‘classic style’ as stasis” (3) must also see it as “historical degradation” (3) and reject it as the “language of the master” (3). Such “self-torture” (3) arises when the poet “limits his memory to the suffering of the victim” (3): such an “admirable wish to honor the degraded ancestor limits their language to phonetic pain, the groan of suffering, the curse of revenge” (3) must lead him to “abuse the master . . . in his own language, and this implies self-deceit. Their view of Caliban is of the enraged pupil. . . . The language of the torturer mastered by the victim. This is viewed as servitude, not as victory” (3).

However, “who in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim” (4)? Who “in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge” (4)? Eventually, the “slave surrendered to amnesia” (4) which is, Walcott argues, the “true history of the New World” (4). This is “our inheritance” (4). To “understand why this happened, to condemn or justify” (4) is the “method of history, and those explanations are always the same: this happened because of that” (4). Once the “contrition of the master replaces the vengeance of the slave” (4), colonial literature can be “pietistic” (4): “it can accuse great art of feudalism and excuse poor art as suffering” (4). The great poets have exchanged the “pressure of the past” (4) for the “weight of the present” (4), this “elemental privilege of naming the new world which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban. They reject ethnic ancestry for faith in elemental man” (5). Walcott suggests a “political philosophy rooted in elation” (5), rather than recrimination, predicated on a “belief in a second Adam, the re-creation of the entire order, from religion to the simplest domestic rituals” (5), but not based on a revival of the “myth of the noble savage” (5) for the vision of the poets of the New World is not innocent or naive in this way: “its savor is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience” (5). “For us in the archipelago the tribal memory is salted with the bitter memory of migration” (5).

Walcott suggests that “arrival must be seen as 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). He is not enamoured of traditional models of history as progress: the “vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time” (6). He has in mind such familiar images “stamped on the colonial memory” (6) as that of the discoverer who “sets a shod foot on virgin sand, kneels, and the savage also kneels from his bushes in awe” (6). All “such hieroglyphics of progress” (6) are “basically comic” (6), “absurd” (6): “such heresy as the world’s becoming holy from Crusoe’s footprint or the imprint of Columbus’ knee” (6). Walcott is quick to stress that this

is not existentialism. Adamic, elemental man cannot be existential. His first impulse is not self-indulgence but awe, and existentialism is simply the myth of the noble savage gone baroque. Such philosophies of freedom are born in

cities. Existentialism is as much nostalgia as is Rousseau's sophisticated primitivism, [a] sick . . . recurrence in French thought. (6)

For those who

contemplate only the shipwreck, 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. . . . [S]eeded in their memories is an imagery of vines ascending broken columns, of dead terraces, of Europe as a nourishing museum. (7)

Though such thinkers "believe in the responsibility of tradition, what they are in awe of is not tradition, which is alert, alive, simultaneous, but of history" (7). The same is "true of the new magnifiers of Africa" (7). Fearing the "loss of . . . the old gods" (7), the "tribe in bondage learned to fortify itself by cunning assimilation of the religion of the Old World. . . . What seemed the loss of tradition was its renewal" (7).

IV

Walcott turns his attention now to T. S. Eliot's view that the "culture of a people" (8) is the "incarnation of its religion" (8). Wondering the degree to which the Christianity taught to the African slave was absorbed, altered and / or rejected, Walcott asks "can an African culture exist, except on the level of polemical art or politics, without an African religion" (8). Ridiculing the "spectacle of mediocre talents raising old totems" (8), Walcott charges that the "polemic poet . . . will wish to produce an epic work, to summon the grandeur of the past, not as myth but as history, and to prophesy in the way that Fascist architecture can be viewed as prophecy" (8). In so doing, the "imagination surrenders to the glorification of history, the ear becomes enslaved, the glorifiers of the tom-tom ignoring the dynamo. These epic poets create an artificial past, a defunct cosmology without the tribal faith" (8). The "'epic' poet in the islands looks to anthropology, to a catalogue of forgotten gods, to midden fragments, artifacts, and the unfinished phrases of a dead speech" (8). When he

looks around these islands and finds no ruins, and because all epic is based on the visible presence of 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. (9)

This results inevitably in "morbidly" (9) which becomes the "tone of any literature . . . which bases its truth on shame or on revenge" (9).

The "epic poetry of the tribe originates . . . in its identification with Hebraic suffering, the migration, the hope of deliverance from bondage" (9). This forms a "residual feeling in much of our literature, the wailing by strange waters for a lost home. It survives in our politics, the subdued search for a Moses" (9).

V

Having argued that the "Old Testament epics of bondage and deliverance provided the slave with a political parallel" (10), Walcott's focus now turns to how the "ethics of Christianity

tempered his vengeance and appeared to deepen his passivity" (10). What disturbs Walcott is the "zeal with which the slave accepted both the Christian and the Hebraic, resigned his gaze to the death of his pantheon, and yet deliberately began to invest his gaze to the death of his pantheon" (10). He resents the "slow massive groan of surrender, the immense laborious conversion of the deated into good niggers, or true Christians" (10), the "Christian treachery that seduces revenge, that led the exhausted tribes to betray their gods" (10). The current generation asks "where are the nostalgic battle chants and the seasonal songs of harvest, the seeding of the great African pastoral" (10)? 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)

The "act of imagination was the creative effort of the tribe" (13).

If the slave appropriated the master's god, he also took his language. The "West Indian poet is faced with a language which he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language" (13). His "function remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols, or alphabet of the official one" (13). As examples of the "colonial experience of language" (13), Walcott gestures to two Francophone poets, St. John Perse and Aimé Césaire. In the poetry of both, "there is a strict, synonymous armature shared without the tradition of the metropolitan language, and which both must have felt to be an inheritance despite their racial and social differences" (14). Though separated by "very different visions" (14) that are the product of very different "formative perceptions" (14), they are united by a common "metropolitan language" (14): what is at stake here is not an "exchange of influences, not imitation, but the tidal advance of the metropolitan language, of its empire . . . which carries simultaneously, fed by such 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 categorise these poets by the wrong process, that is, by history" (15).

Though Perse and Césaire are "men of diametrically challenging backgrounds, racial opposites to use the language of politics, one patrician and conservative, the other proletarian and revolutionary, classic and romantic, Prospero and Caliban" (16), they possess a "shared sensibility" (16). "If we think of one as poor and the other as privileged . . . , if we must see one as black and one as white, we are not only dividing this sensibility by the process of the sociologist, but we are denying the range of either poet" (17). Walcott stresses that he is "not making a case for assimilation and for the common simplicity of all men, we are interested in their differences" (17). But what both Perse and Césaire have in common is "their elation, their staggering elation in possibility" (17), 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" (17). Our "minor

'revolutionary' poets who assume a grandeur without a language to create it" (17) are a "brood of thin, querulous fledglings who steal fragments of Césaire for their own nests" (17), while simultaneously they "condemn Perse as a different animal, a white poet" (17).

Thinking of "tradition as history" (17), Walcott says, one group "claims that this tradition is wholly African and that its responses are alerted through the nostalgia of one race, but that group must allow the Asian and the Mediterranean the same fiction" (17). Then 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" (18): the Caribbean sensibility 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)

Many critics "reject imitation, the basis of the tradition, for originality, the false basis of innovation, they represent eventually the old patronising attitude adapted to contemporaneous politics, for their demand for naturalness, novelty, originality, or truth is again based on preconceptions of behaviour" (18). They anticipate the "exuberance, spontaneity, and refreshing dialect of the tribe. Certain performances are called for, including the fashionable incoherence of revolutionary anger, and everyone is again appeased, the masochist-critic by the attack on his 'values,' the masochist-poet by the approval of his victim" (18). The "anger of the black is entertainment, or theater" (18) for the consumption of the "critic-tourist" (18), the "liberal" (18) who "warms to the speech of the ghetto" (18) and whose "benignity" (18) in fact "perpetuated 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, and the pathos is that most blacks have been left to believe this, and into the tragedy of believing their difference" (19). Often, Walcott argues, "it is the educated and privileged poet who masks his education and privilege behind a fake exoticism of poverty and the pastoral. They write one way and speak another" (19). From the "treason of the clerks" (19) we now have the "treason of the intellectuals" (19).

Walcott lambastes the "degeneration of technique" (19) that masks itself in "originality" (19). "Bad verse written by blacks is better than good verse written by whites because, say the revolutionaries, the same standards do not apply. This is seen as pride, the opposite of inferiority" (19). Such "belligerent naiveté" (19) is characteristic of a "pubescent literature" (19) that "accepts subconsciously a condition of being praised or corrected, which may resist but also insinuates by resistance, the correctives of a 'superior' or at least an older discipline or tradition" (19). Walcott resents that for "purity, then, for pure black Afro-Aryanism, only the unsoiled black is valid, and West Indianism is a taint, and other strains adulterate him. The extremists, the purists, are beginning to exercise those infections, so that a writer of 'mixed,' hence 'degenerate,' blood can be nothing stronger than a liberal" (19). Such writers, like Walcott himself, "will become hermits or rogue animals, increasingly exotic hybrids, broken bridges between two ancestries, Europe and the Third World of Africa or Asia" (20) at the hands of the "machinery of radicalism" (20):

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. . . . Art cannot last long in this shale. It crumbles

like those slogans, fragments and shards of a historical fault. Power now becomes increasingly divided and tribal when it is based on genetics. (20) All this springs from a "rejection of language" (20) and consequently "atrophies the young who are warned against assimilation" (20).

On History as Exile

The "colonial in exile" (21) must assume "postures of metropolitan cynicism" (21) in an attempt to "enter the sense of history which is within every Englishman and European, but which he himself has never felt toward Africa or Asia" (21). He has also developed the "other sense, that the history of Africa or of Asia is inferior" (21). But the generation after him, which 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. . . . 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)

Poets of this generation "see poetry as a form of historical instruction. 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). They "grow obsessed with the innovation of forms" (22) which is seen as "critical strategy" (22); it "imitates what it believes to be the tribal mode" (22), using at times "fragments of the original language to adorn itself, even if such language is not its natural tongue" (22). This results in a "new conservatism . . . , a new dignity more reactionary and pompous than the direction of the language used" (23), moving "manically between the easy applause of dialect, the argot of the tribe and ceremonial speech, the 'memory' of the tribe" (23).

Walcott argues that the "truest writers are those who see language not as linguistic process but as a living element" (25) by contrast to those who "confuse language with linguistics and with archaeology" (25). Such a view replaces provincial concepts of imitation and originality. Fear of mutation obsesses minor poets. But in any age a common genius 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. We know that the great poets have no wish to be different, not 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 they become bonfires. (25)

It is "only academics and frightened poets who talk of Beckett's debt to Joyce or Pinter's to Beckett" (25).

Walcott writes that from childhood he wanted to become a poet and, "like any colonial child I was taught English literature as my natural inheritance" (25). The "snow and

daffodils . . . were real, more real than the heat and the oleander" (25) because they "lived on the page, in imagination and therefore in memory" (25). "There is a memory of imagination that has nothing to do with actual experience, which is, in fact, another life" (25). He acknowledges that he "felt both a rejection and a fear of Europe while I learned its poetry" (26). These "emotions have changed, they are subtler, more controlled" (26): what "survives in the slave is nostalgia for imperial models, Europe or Africa" (26). However, he felt that were he to live in Europe, he would never have become a "poet, a West Indian poet" (26) because 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" (26). But the "older and more assured" (26) he grew, the "stronger my isolation as a poet, the more I needed to become omnivorous about the art and literature of Europe to understand my own world" (26). The "prophets of bitterness" (26), Walcott argues, "preach not to the converted, but to those who have never lost faith. . . . Fisherman and peasant know who they are and what they are and where they are, and when we show them our wounded sensibilities we are . . . displaying self-inflicted wounds" (26).

Walcott concludes by proclaiming his acceptance of "this archipelago of the Americas" (27):

I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who brought me, I have no such father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper 'history,' for If I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. You were when you acted your roles, your given, historical roles of slave seller and slave buyer, men acting as men. . . . [T]o you, inwardly forgiven grandfathers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks . . . for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that my inheritance and your gift. (27)