

CHAPTER I

*Walcott, writing and the Caribbean: issues
and directions*

Derek Walcott's Nobel lecture, delivered at the high noon of his career, is a good vantage point from which to take a comprehensive look at his achievement. The lecture brings together virtually all the major concerns which have driven his work and shaped his idea of himself as a writer. It provides a conceptual framework within which to discuss the work, not only by the extent to which it confirms positions previously evident, but also by the extent to which it represents changes of emphasis. The concerns which it brings into focus have been central to debate about the nature and identity of Caribbean literature and culture. This interest is by no means parochial or limiting. For Walcott, to define himself as Caribbean man is to delineate a view of the world and to locate himself in the world.

These concerns include the legacy of Caribbean history, the effects of diaspora and the challenge of cultural fragmentation and diversity, the factors of class, race and language as cultural and artistic determinants, as well as the challenges of craft, to use a favourite word of his. Walcott's stature as a writer, as is the case with any great writer, is not just a function of his having an extraordinarily compelling way with words. It also rests on the fact that his work represents a considerable body of integrated ideas, some of which are additionally engaging or contentious because they are not afraid to go against the popular grain.

For anyone who attempts a commentary on Walcott's extensive range and output, a primary challenge is to bring his poetry and his plays into discursive relationship. He has excelled in both genres, and has been working in both from the beginning. By the time he was out of his teens, he had made a mark locally in both genres. His

subsequent achievement in either would be enough to ensure his status as a major writer. By and large, critics have tended to concentrate on one or other, and some to regard him as more accomplished in one than in the other.¹ In general, there has been more international critical attention given to the poetry than to the plays. On the other hand, by virtue of the appeal of production and the communal immediacy of theatre, the plays have tended to enjoy greater currency within the Caribbean.

Walcott sees himself as, essentially, the poet. He speaks out of a reverential belief in poetry as a well-nigh sacred vocation. Poetry cherishes 'occluded sanctities', '[p]laces as threatened by . . . prose as a headland is by the bulldozer or a sea-almond by the surveyor's string' (*WTS*, 82). But the Nobel lecture had opened with a theatrical image. It is the image of East Indian boys, on a Saturday afternoon, preparing to perform a 'dramatization of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*' (*WTS*, 65), on a field in the Trinidadian village of Felicity. The dramatizing of an epic – no doubt the most natural thing to do – is itself indicative of the original identification of drama with poetry. Walcott mentions that only recently he himself had adapted Homer's *Odyssey* for the stage. In his evocation of the event at Felicity, the dramatic sweep of the scene is suffused with lyrical feeling.

Interviewers have raised with Walcott the question of the relationship between his poetry and his plays. In his answers, he has remarked the common ground of the two, as well as their differences and complementarity.² A poet for whom metaphor is the source and being of poetry, he sees a play as poetry in that it is metaphoric in conception and staging, in the action and in the characters no less than in the quality of its language: 'In theatre we see this metaphor as a human being. The metaphor of *Dream* was, for me, an old man who looked like an ape, and above his shoulder, a round white full moon' (*CDW*, 38).

However, despite such identification of drama with poetry, it is also true that the two genres satisfy in Walcott different, complementary impulses, needs, talents. His poetry, notwithstanding its narrative and even epic interest, and its engagement with large social concerns, speaks primarily in a personal, lyrical voice. In the plays, notwithstanding some autobiographical material, especially in the

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later work, the author's personal voice is submerged in the voices of his characters. For instance, whereas in the poetry he speaks *for* and *about* the folk, the unlettered fisherman and charcoal burner, for 'Mass Man' (*CP*, 99), in the plays he lets them speak for themselves and express their communal predicament and vibrancy more or less in their own terms.

'The theatre', Walcott tells David Montenegro in 1987, 'gives you satisfactions that poetry might not, or allows certain parts of your voice to express themselves that poetry does not' (*CDW*, 144). In his essay 'What the Twilight Says', the introduction to *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1970), he had spoken about the split within his creative consciousness between 'the interior life of poetry [and] the outward life of action and dialect' (*WTS*, 4). The latter he equated with the theatre. While Walcott speaks of his poetry, in contrast to his plays, as representing an 'interior life', and as seeking to be '*quietly* accurate' (*CDW*, 58; my emphasis) in doing so, he also advocates, in an interview with Nancy Schoenberger (1983), the idea of poetry as public, bardic performance – 'it has to do with recitation as an idea; it has to do with memory and metre' (*CDW*, 94). The seeming contradiction here – poetry as interior life and as public performance at one and the same time – may perhaps be understood as expressing the idea of fusing poetry and drama, of realizing the ways in which each is energized by the other: 'I have a belief that a poet is instinctively closer to the theatre than a novelist or fiction writer because, structurally, the feel of the poem is the feel of a play, or the feel of a play is like a very large poem' (*CDW*, 92). Again, 'it works both ways: the lyric impulse generally needs to be fortified by dramatic experience, and the reverse should be true' (*CDW*, 93).

Whatever truth there may be in Walcott's claim that 'a poet is instinctively closer to the theatre than a novelist', one must remember that a significant feature of his poetry has been the way in which it has sought to incorporate certain qualities of prose fiction. In a 1992 interview with Rebekah Presson, he acknowledges the dramatic factor in his poem *Omeros*, and then says, 'In a large poem, though, the writing is like a novel, and as in a novel, everything is in there – geographic description, the weather, the characters, and the action, and so on' (*CDW*, 190).

When J. P. White observes that in his plays Walcott is 'more clearly funny, satirical, angry, bawdy, tender and loving than in the poems' (*CDW*, 170), Walcott seems to sense in the remark a preference for the plays as being more congenial and accommodating. In a different context, he might well have responded by calling attention to the funny, satirical, tender and loving, if not bawdy, moments in his poetry. However, he accepts White's distinction and proceeds to justify it by way of an argument that constitutes not only a defence of poetry, but also an assertion of its superiority to drama. He becomes caught up in the twists and turns of arguing that poetry goes beyond comedy and tragedy because it has 'the quality of the sublime': 'Ultimately tragedy, when compared to poetry, is a farce' (*CDW*, 170). What redeems the farcical in tragedy, in *Othello*, in *Oedipus*, is what is achieved through the poetry: the sublime.

Walcott then virtually does a volte-face, when he considers the West Indian situation: 'On the other hand, however, in terms of being West Indian, this idea can almost be contradicted' (*CDW*, 171). He seems to suggest that, in the Caribbean, whatever he has been calling the sublime will necessarily have something comic, even farcical about it. This is because of the nature of Caribbean artistic expression as shaped by Caribbean history. He adverts to 'African melodies', Gospel music and calypso: 'The ritualistic thing in Calypso is comic in its drive, even if you have a tragic content. Now that is what I would like to accomplish. I won't consider myself to be a fulfilled West Indian artist until I have written something in poetry with that kind of spirit' (*CDW*, 171). We seem to have come round to the idea that the ideal is a fusion of the poetry and drama, the lyric and the dramatic impulses, the quiet, interior voice and the public, performing voice.

At this point it might be appropriate to note that contradiction and paradox are characteristic features of Walcott's thought. They constitute the burden of Victor D. Questel's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 'Derek Walcott: Contradiction and Resolution: Paradox, Inconsistency, Ambivalence and their Resolution in Derek Walcott's Writings 1946–75'.³ Questel's title in itself seems to imply that paradox and contradiction ought necessarily to be resolved. While

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some of the contradictions in Walcott's thought may indeed be a matter of straightforward inconsistency, or change of mind, or perhaps even confusion, it is also true that with Walcott paradox and contradiction are rhetorical features, indicating a way of seeing and a view of life and of 'truth'. They are aspects of that creative 'schizophrenia' which he has cultivated.⁴ Born in January, he says in *Another Life*, 'my sign was Janus, / I saw with twin heads, / and everything I say is contradicted' (*CP*, 281).

The apparent fondness for paradox and contradiction is one aspect of the self-image that Walcott projects and pursues. His poetry especially is an imaginative self-exploration and self-creation, a fiction and drama of himself. This writing of the self involves a process of self-address and self-interrogation. This pursuit is not ego-centricity or self-indulgent display of personal angst. It is Walcott's way of engaging with the world, by examining himself-in-the-world. The general sense in which the poet enters the fictive construct and unfolding story which is his poetry is instanced, for example, in the way in which he enters, as a character, the narrative fiction *Omeros*.

The poet's construction of himself as a character in a fiction is related to his interest in the interplay and fusion of genres and modes mentioned earlier. A major, pathfinding example in this regard is the poem *Another Life* (1973), which is at the same time an autobiography and a novel of sorts. Significantly, in the original manuscript out of which the poem emerged, Walcott seems to see all genres, except perhaps drama, as modes of autobiography: 'Those who have abandoned poetry for other forms of autobiography like fiction, the long essay and the travel book will remain split down the middle, petrified and Janus-headed' (*MS One*, 39). Autobiography is a form of fiction: 'All autobiographies should be in the third person . . . Henceforth "I" should be known as "him" – an object distant enough to regard dispassionately' (*MS One*, 9). As he was to write decades later, in *The Bounty*, 'I myself am a fiction' (*B*, 50). Walcott's work as a whole, including even the drama to varying degrees, may be regarded, then, as one continuing fiction, a story whose protagonist is the poet-persona, a 'character' who is gradually being discovered and created through various metamorphoses,

contradictions and continuities, but who is not necessarily recognizable at any given moment as the D. Walcott whom one might meet in the flesh. The idea of the fiction of self, of one's life and writing as being a striving towards the realization of an idea of oneself, not only informs much of Walcott's poetry; it is explicitly stated in the portrayal of some of his characters. In 'Koenig of the River', the protagonist, Koenig, becomes aware of himself as a character out of fiction: 'he felt bodiless, like a man stumbling from / the pages of a novel' (*CP*, 380). In *Another Life*, after sketching some of the minor characters of the world of his childhood, he sums up: 'the fiction of their own lives claimed each one' (*CP*, 181). This idea, of the individual being taken over by his fiction of self, takes on a suggestion of danger when Walcott observes, 'A writer can get trapped in his own image: look what it did to Hemingway' (*CDW*, 29). There may be a sub-text of typical Walcott self-knowledge here.

The idea of the life as an unfolding narrative which gives shape and significance to that life is underscored by the fact that the persona not only looks backwards at times, as in *Another Life*, to confront the idea of the young self out of which he has evolved, but also projects an image and idea of a future self which he thinks or hopes he is growing towards. In *Midsummer* (1984), past and future images of self neatly cohere in a moment which encompasses the whole narrative of the life:

Sometimes the flash is seen, a sudden exultation
 of lightning fixing earth in its place; the asphalt's skin
 smells freshly of childhood in the drying rain.
 Then I believe that it is still possible, the happiness
 of truth, and the young poet who stands in the mirror
 smiles with a nod. He looks beautiful from this distance.
 And I hope I am what he saw, an enduring ruin. (*M*, 23)

The image with which the Nobel lecture ends – the transfiguring memory of the moment 'when a boy [Walcott's young self] opened an exercise book and . . . framed stanzas that might contain the light of the hills' (*TWS*, 84) – is another instance of the 'closing', the engagement of 'I' and 'he'.

Midsummer is itself a version of the fiction of self, never mind its explicit lyric-meditative mode. And when, in the middle of that

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work, Walcott speaks punningly of it as ‘leaves that keep trying to summarize [“summerize”] my life’ (*M*, 40), we recognize, under the whimsy, a significant definition of his entire output. An even more definitive enactment of the idea of the fiction of self, and a landmark moment in this fiction as process, is the narrative poem ‘The Schooner *Flight*’. It is the self-portrait and life-summary of its narrator-protagonist, the sailor-poet Shabine, another Walcott mask. At the poem’s open end, Shabine projects into the future an idea of himself which is another version of the ‘enduring ruin’, the ‘old poet, / facing the wind / and nothing, which is, / the loud world in his mind’ (*CP*, 290):

My first friend was the sea. Now, is my last.
 I stop talking now. I work, then I read,
 cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast.
 I try to forget what happiness was . . . (*CP*, 361).

Such variations on the stoical, dispassionate bardic figure, seasoned by passion and experience, oracular in his silence, are a fulfilment of the idea of the mind which ‘enspheres all circumstance’, as imaged in the ‘strange, cyclic chemistry’ of the orange tree in the title poem of *In A Green Night* (1962). All the opposites are held in the harmonious yet dynamic tension which is the paradox of life. The power of mind, its capacity to sustain and to renew man, is a leading theme in Walcott. Emotion makes us human; mind ennoble us. As he prays at the end of ‘Crusoe’s Island’, ‘may the mind / Catch fire till it cleaves / Its mould of clay at last’ (*CP*, 71).

The circumstance, multifarious and contradictory, which the mind seeks to ensphere – the ‘nothing, which is [everything], / [which is] the loud world in [his] mind’ (*CP*, 290) – is comprehended by Walcott under the aspect of Caribbean experience, which is to say Caribbean history. His work is driven by a keen sense of that history. The Nobel lecture, like all of Walcott, is instinct with a sense of the West Indian past. At the same time, it brings to yet another climax his obsessive quarrel with history.⁵ The lecture moves to the rhythm of a solemn joy, an elation (another favourite Walcott word) that celebrates the endurance and creativity of a people in spite of a history that, in some eyes, seemed to have

doomed them to blight. 'At last, islands not written about, but writing themselves' (*WTS*, 78). Walcott accepts the Nobel prize in the name of the place and the people, seeing himself as but representative of their endurance and creativity. The elation to which the lecture moves is a reproof to what he calls 'the sigh of History', with which the lecture contends. Watching the 'arrowing flocks of scarlet ibises' coming in at evening over the Caroni Swamp to 'cover an islet until it turned into a flowering tree', and connecting them with the scarlet costumes of the boy archers performing the *Ramleela*, Walcott remarks: 'The sigh of History meant nothing here. These two visions, the *Ramleela* and the arrowing flocks of scarlet ibises, blent into a single gasp of gratitude. Visual surprise is natural in the Caribbean; it comes with the landscape, and faced with its beauty, the sigh of History dissolves' (*WTS*, 68).

The challenge of coming to terms with West Indian history assumed particular, acute significance for West Indian writers of Walcott's generation. The issue found a natural point of focus in the nineteenth-century British historian James Anthony Froude's scathing assessment of the West Indies, in his *The English in the West Indies; or The Bow of Ulysses* (1887). Froude's assessment was revived and reworked by V. S. Naipaul in his *Middle Passage* (1962) to the now infamous conclusion, 'History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.'⁶ The echo of that 'nothing' still reverberates in West Indian literature, although writers of later generations have been less and less exercised about it. Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, all have explicitly addressed the charge of nothingness. 'Nothing' has been a central theme in Walcott.⁷ He has sought to transform it imaginatively from a stigma of non-achievement and hopelessness to an inviting challenge and opportunity, a blank page on which there is everything to be written. The provenance of this 'nothing' must also acknowledge the French-Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire, who claimed a future for 'those who never tamed steam or electricity / those who did not explore sea or sky / . . . / those who knew of voyages only when uprooted'.⁸

The 'nothing' of the Froude–Naipaul nexus has persisted in Walcott as a catalyst for his ideas about cultural and artistic creativity in the West Indies. In 'What the Twilight Says' he addressed

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directly the passage from Froude which Naipaul had used as the epigraph to *The Middle Passage*. The quarrel resonated through Walcott's 1974 essays 'The Muse of History' and 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?' And now, in the Nobel lecture, Froude is still on his mind, as he goes back to the very same passage, when he speaks of 'the way the Caribbean is still looked at, illegitimized, rootless, mongrelized. "No people there," to quote Froude, "in the true sense of the word." No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken' (*WTS*, 67–8).⁹

Exercised by this anxiety about history, Walcott developed the idea of going beyond history, of transcending it. The idea had its most sustained expression in 'The Muse of History', 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?' and in *Another Life*, but it had begun to be forcefully articulated quite a bit earlier, notably in a 1964 newspaper article entitled 'A Dilemma Faces W[est] I[ndian] Artists': 'Decadence begins when a civilization falls in love with its ruins. Those who claim that there is no sense of history in the West Indies, that its peoples are without that sense of the past which fertilizes art as tough weeds fertilize a ruin, suffer from a longing for that decadence.'¹⁰ The idea of going beyond history revalued the stigma of 'nothing' that history had supposedly inflicted on Caribbean man, and made it his very ground of possibility. So, the 'deep, amnesiac blow' that had 'cleft the brain' (*CP*, 88) was no longer a cause for hopelessness and despair. 'Amnesia' now became a privileged concept. The loss of what had been lost, and lost to memory, in the sea-crossings, should be accepted joyfully. West Indian man could be Adamic, if he freed his mind of the baggage of history and the awe of history. Adam had no history, and all the world to name. In this theory, the history that was being transcended was history conceived of as linear, a time-bound chain of cause and effect, abuse and recrimination, the worship of fact and historical time, 'the sugarcane factory's mechanization of myth / ground into rubbish' (*CP*, 287). This worship involved a 'vision of man' as 'a creature chained to the past', rather than as an 'elemental' being 'inhabited by presences' (*WTS*, 37). Walcott argued that the true New World writers will '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 the fitful

muse, memory. Their philosophy, based on a contempt for historic time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old' (*WTS*, 37).

So Walcott arrives at an intendedly revolutionary position: 'In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.'¹¹ Naipaul had written: 'In West Indian towns history seems dead, irrelevant.'¹² Now, Walcott takes the baleful 'reality' of the Naipaulian 'irrelevant' and turns it into a virtue. But Walcott's ostensibly radical position, more radical than that of the conventionally radical, might appear heretical, or a clever disguise under which to maintain a conservative and accommodating stance towards the abuses of history. It might seem like yet another evasion of history.

However, there is really no denial of the past in Walcott. He has returned again and again to recognition of what survived, and more substantially so in his later work. His work is instinct with a sense of the past and is in large measure a complex, sometimes paradoxical negotiation with the past. We can trace this negotiation from, say, the early historical drama *Henri Christophe* (1950) and the 'epic drama' *Drums and Colours* (first produced 1958) and the dramatic fable *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (also first produced 1958), a succinct replay of, and disquisition on West Indian history, to a much later play like *A Branch of the Blue Nile*. This last-named, while not being an historical drama as such, is resonant with a sense of West Indian history, a resonance eloquently articulated from the point of view of the self-interest of one of the characters. Of the countless poems one might refer to as enacting the confrontation with history and as acknowledging the past, even while Walcott is otherwise expounding a theory of history as irrelevant, one might appropriately choose 'Mass Man' and 'The Almond Trees'. The latter, which will be discussed in chapter 2, comes to terms with the supposed absence of history in the Caribbean.

In 'Mass Man', the poet-persona is watching the masqueraders doing the road march in the Trinidad Carnival. He sees ordinary, ostensibly insignificant people transforming their lives for a moment through costumes which represent power and splendour. One, a