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Derek Walcott's Poetics of Cultural Identity

With the receipt of the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature, Derek Walcott's literary fame almost overnight soared to unprecedented heights, just as has been the case with so many other Nobel laureates. Discussion, however, almost immediately turned to the question of whether he, his poetry, and his plays represent the post-colonial cultural heritage of the Caribbean in general and his home of Santa Lucia in particular or, on the other hand, abandon that culture and its unique referential framework in favor of a pseudo-universal but fundamentally Eurocentric mode of discourse. Although this line of inquiry may have obscured important aspects of his genius, it is not without foundation and merit. Indeed the citation on the prize diploma seems to invite such queries: it explains that the prize was awarded «för en diktning med stor lyskraft, buren av en historisk vision som vuxit fram ur ett mångkulturellt engagemang» (for literature with a luminous power born of a historic vision which has grown out of a multi-cultural engagement)[1]. But the question immediately arises as to how this multi-cultural engagement is to be understood, i.e. whether it is at one extreme so broad and accommodating that it lacks any but superficial qualities characteristic of Caribbean post-colonial culture or at the other is a specific instantiation of the lavish and magnificent cultural diversity and richness unique to that region.

Although the question of the degree to which Walcott speaks with the voice of the Caribbean and, more importantly, as a post-colonial poet has long been hotly debated in relatively narrow critical circles, the Nobel Prize not only raised the issue in a much broader context but also seems to have provided an answer that has found wide – or perhaps only popular – acceptance[2]. In reporting on the awarding of the prize, the *New York Times*, for example, portrays Walcott as the accredited spokesman for an entire culture: «In his literary works Walcott has laid a course for his own cultural environment, but through them he speaks to each and everyone of us... In him the West Indian culture has found its great poet»[3]. The working premise of much subsequent general commentary became that West Indian culture in general was localized, concentrated, and distilled in Walcott's works. Generalizing, for example, about the rationale for the

awarding of the Nobel Prize -- indeed over generalizing about a very complex and intricate process[4]. Stephen Breslow, in the lead article on Walcott's receipt of the prize in *World Literature Today*, opines: «If there is any dominant principle for literary prize-giving that influences the Swedish Academy, it is: a strong regional voice that transcends its topical locality, through the depth and breadth of its poetic resonance and through its global human implication (267). Although acknowledging the broad import of Walcott's work, Breslow expresses no methodological or substantive reservations about understanding his œuvre as representative of post-colonial Caribbean culture. He does not explore, however, the agency by which it represents that culture or the very complex nature of the culture in question.

Walcott's poetic achievement, however, is richer and more varied than that of standard bearer for Caribbean culture. His poetry and drama rise to the more challenging demand of suggesting a means by which literature can contribute to and perhaps even constitute a sense of cultural identity in the wildly and wonderfully diverse traditions of the Caribbean in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Walcott himself has given some impetus to this way of approaching his works. In a famous passage from «The Schooner Flight» (from *The Star-Apple Kingdom*), he provides a kind of literary autobiography.

> [...]
> I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
> I had a sound colonial education,
> I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
> and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (346)

To the extent these few lines spoken by Shabine, the poem's protagonist, can be applied to Walcott himself, they accurately describe his genealogy, background, and defining image. The rhetorical structure of the passage almost requires the immediate rejection of the first option that the speaker is nobody and dictates the conclusion that the voice of a nation is speaking. Straightforward and assertive, the lines provide no indication of how highly problematic and poetically rich the subject *I* and the very concept of a nation in point of fact are, particularly the marginalized national culture based on a colonial education and having a mixed «English», «nigger», and «Dutch» heritage. For a poet, though, blood lines are not as important as linguistic and intellectual filiations which in Walcott's case also extend in varying ways through at least French, Spanish, Swahili, Japanese, Hindi, and Creole.

In this context, the idea of a «nation» is not best understood in the restrictive sense of the ideological apparatus of state power, but rather in terms of the expression of the popular sentiment of an emerging community which is defined in part by its marginalization. And notably this marginalization in turn provides necessary cohesion to the community's inherent diversity and heterogeneity[5]. A nation so conceived is explicitly grounded in expression – in the process of signifying – and thus in language, which can never escape its temporality. The nation, therefore, is constantly emerging and in the

process of becoming, rather than being abstractly defined – supposedly once and for all – by foundational, originary documents. Although having the temporal contingency or openness of an unfinished story, this kind of nation in this poem is localized in space. The performance expressing broadly held cultural sentiment is undertaken with reference to and in a specific place: the place surrounded and delimited by the sea, the sea the «nigger love», the Antilles and more generally the whole Caribbean region.

Something at least modestly utopian animates the post-colonial expressive performance: the hope however dim that life will be better. But the past, more often fragmented, disjunctive, deracinated, and displaced than coherent and continuous – indeed a past moving from the periphery toward a tentative and tenuous center – is more important. This kind of nation grounded in linguistic performance, defined by a potentially centrifugal heterogeneity, and circumscribed as well as delimited by exclusion and marginalization is in some senses rather fragile and uncertain, if not frail and ephemeral. Yet Walcott celebrates not only his language of expressive performance, but also the extravagant and scandalous cultural diversity, the heteroglossia, and the colorful centripetal coalescing of disparate historical fragments associated with it while nonetheless retaining an acute awareness of the pain and suffering that suffuse and permeate them.

Poetry that can serve as a vehicle for cognitive and emotional orientation within the context of this kind of nation is of necessity not so much made as remade but in a way that does not diminish in any sense the fundamental creativity of the process. To be sure, this assertion may seem a simple variant of a more general view that every poet has to some degree an agonistic relationship with the past, but Walcott's rapport with cultural history is not fundamentally adversarial either with respect to obviously Antillean culture or the language, rhetoric, and poetics of the high but colonizing culture. In his Nobel lecture he explains:

> [The] gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its «making» but its remaking, the fragmented memory, the armature that frames the god, even the rite that surrenders it to a final pyre (Nobel Lecture 4).

This view of the poetic process acknowledges a belatedness, an awareness of living late in the history of the world. This belatedness, however, does not appear to be a source of aesthetic or existential anguish. Walcott does not suffer under the burden of the past but rather sees it as a rich repository of material to be plundered and exploited, poetically revitalized, and enlivened by use in previously unimagined conjunctions, juxtapositions, and contexts. Addressing this point specifically in the essay «What the Twilight Says», an introduction to a collection of one-act plays, Walcott argues: «...

what is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew» (10). Later in the same essay, he is even more specific when discussing the creation of a language adequate for the expression of West Indian reality:

> It did not matter how rhetorical, how dramatically heightened the language was if its tone were true, whether its subject was the rise and fall of a Haitian king or a small-island fisherman, and the only way to re-create the language was to share in the agony of its articulation. This did not mean the jettisoning of «culture» but the writer's making creative use of his schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new (17).

Being neither locked in an agonistic struggle with the past nor rejecting the literary heritage of colonial powers – albeit in a post-colonial era that has led many other writers to radically different, even aggressively antagonistic conclusions – Walcott can write with the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer as well as the shards and ill-fitting pieces of Caribbean history as a simultaneous present.

Walcott's orientation and commitments stand out in arresting relief against the position advanced by many other writers who would associate themselves with post-colonialism, for example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who, in stark contrast to Walcott, has argued that the literature of Europe from Homer to the present is precisely what must excised from the mind of the post-colonial writer. In a statement at the beginning of *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, he notes: «In 1977 I published *Petals of Blood* and said farewell to the English language as a vehicle of my writing of plays, novels and short stories... However I continued writing explanatory prose in English... This book *Decolonizing the Mind* is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way» (xiv). The rationale for this position is grounded in his belief the «the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe» (4).

If though, as Walcott believes, poems are remade rather than made, the poetic process is primarily one of renaming rather than naming. Although Walcott mentions a general parallelism of his position as a poet to that of Adam, to whom was given the privilege of naming the animals (Genesis 2: 19-20), he does not stress it. He is living not only in a post-colonial society but also a post-Edenic world[6]. Although his task is fundamentally different from that envisioned for the poet by Hölderlin, Heidegger or more recently René Char, their understanding of originary naming or calling into being by the process of naming nonetheless resonates faintly in his thinking[7]. His overall agenda is more like that associated with the Confucian doctrine of the Rectification of Names (zheng ming) but without the overt and very significant question of the correct and just form of government[8].

Appropriately, the poem entitled «Names» provides a particularly detailed description of the process of renaming and the remaking of poetry.

> My race began as the sea began,
> with no nouns, and with no horizon... (305)

These first two lines refer to the primal situation when the oceans were not distinguished from the firmament typical of many creation myths and certainly prominent in Genesis 1. Similarly the poet's race began undistinguished. In this stage of primal unity no naming took place – there were no nouns – because there was no separation or division. Time was also one:

> I began with no memory,
> I began with no future... (305)

The pristine time of oneness came to an end with the sea-eagle's scream from the rocks and the uttering of «that terrible vowel / that I». The vowel is terrible in that the uttering of *I* immediately separates the self from the other, creates a fundamental rift or alterity in existence, and gives rise – to use Lacanian terminology – to the symbolic realm[9]. At this juncture – as a natural consequence of the division creating the *I* – the sky folded separating water and sky, history was unveiled, and a «stick to trace our names on the sand» was provided by the sea. The stick, an instrument for writing with all of the phallic associations of the pen, betokens with force and clarity the entry into the symbolic world and the consequent advent of desire. The *I* not only marks the emergence of a self but also warrants discourse and beyond discourse, dialogue.

Linguistically *I*, like all of the personal pronouns, is remarkable in that no unique and stable antecedent exists to which it refers each time it is used. Each use constitutes its own reference. It can be defined only as a function of discourse. Benveniste notes: «*Je* ne peut être défini qu'en termes de 'locution', non en termes d'objets, comme l'est un signe nominal. *Je* signifie 'la personne qui énonce la présente instance de discours contenant je'. Instance unique par définition, et valable seulement dans son unicité» (35)[10]. *I* also defines the specific meaning of *here* and *now* in any particular discourse and constitutes the *you* with whom the necessary dialogue will take place[11]. That «terrible vowel, that I», thus, brings into existence an entire world with spatial and temporal features and an animated sense of alterity characteristic of the symbolic realm. While certainly positing an egocentric world view, that terrible vowel much more importantly foregrounds the constitutive power and foundational importance of language.

The second part of the poem begins with a question:

> And when they name these bays
> bays,
> was it nostalgia or irony? (306)

Walcott is questioning the motive for using the word *bay*, a word brought from European traditions with the imperialist colonizers and laden with centuries of accreted meaning to describe something in the new world. Was it motivated by seeing a similarity between a natural structure in the country of origin and one in the colonial world that gave rise to nostalgia? Or seeing primarily differences, did they use the word with

a bitter and appropriative irony? What is more significant than the motivation for colonial naming, however, is that the power of naming – or renaming – in a post-colonial world is the prerogative of all. The right to signify emerges in Walcott's poetics as more important than subversion or transgression.

> Listen: my children say:
> *moubain* : the hogplum
> *cerise*: the cherry
> *baie-la*: the bay,
> with fresh green voices
> they were once themselves
> in the way the wind bends
> our natural inflections. (307)

The claim to and domestication of space is enacted through the power and agency of naming[12]. Through this power,the almost overwhelming vastness of space is given contours, is tamed, is navigated, and is made serviceable to the human family. Language creates what is at the heart of that all but untranslatable Greek word νόστος: to return home, to return to a place of safety.

Walcott's commitment to language and most especially to poetry is supreme and sovereign. They are the agency of individual and ethnic identity that transcends facile categorization, though is not necessarily inaccessible to discursive reasoning. Poetic naming, as Walcott understands that process, provides an emotional orientation and social focus that do not fall neatly into received socio-political categories. Joseph Brodsky, Walcott's friend and fellow Nobel laureate, well summarizes the position: «He acts out of the belief that language is greater than its masters or its servants, that poetry, being its supreme version, is therefore an instrument of self-betterment for both, i.e., that it is a way to gain an identity superior to the confines of class, race, and ego» (40). It may be that such poetry, the most democratic of all the arts, will provide a site where emerging ethnicities can in relative concord claim their own space and make it home, a nation-space, to borrow a term from Bhabha, continually in the process of articulation.

[1] Cited from a copy of the diploma. See *Les Prix Nobel/The Nobel Prizes 1992* for detailed information on the citations for each of the prizes. The reference to social or cultural engagement may well suggest the way in which his works are seen by the Swedish Academy as fulfilling the requirement of Alfred Nobel's will that the prize be awarded for work of an ideal tendency.

[2] Almost from the beginning of his career, supporter and antagonists have debated whether Walcott is representative of Caribbean culture or has capitulated to the tastes and standard of western high culture. As examples of the thinking that argues Walcott has abandoned his role as a spokesman for the post-colonial Caribbean see Lloyd King and Ralph Campbell as well as the unsigned article «How Far Are Derek Walcott and Edward Braithwaite Similar?» All three are discussed by Breslow. A discussion of the history of the debate and an admirably precise formulation of the fundamental question is offered by Patricia Ismond in her essay «Walcott versus Braithwaite».

[3] This observation is attributed by the author, Sheila Rule, to the citation. It is in point of fact not part of the citation on the official diploma, but it is of interest because it suggests the popular perception of Walcott and the role into which he is often cast.

[4] See Espmark for perhaps the best discussion to date of the principles and rationale governing the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature from the perspective of the Swedish Academy.

[5] See Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* for a penetrating series of essays dealing with the relationship of national identity and narration. See his introduction (1-7) for a discussion of the problem of defining a nation in the contemporary world.

[6] Walcott himself in «What the Twilight Says: An Overture» (1970) speaks of colonial authors as new Adams (6). Critical analyses of his work have also compared him with Adam. See for example Michel Fabre's «'Adam's Task of Giving Things Their Name': The Poetry of Derek Walcott» (1974). The theme of Adamic naming is not developed in the insightful article. In the years that have followed the publication of both these essays, it has become increasingly clear that the comparison is probably more misleading than enlightening.

[7] See specifically Hölderlin's «Wie wenn am Feiertage»and «Brot und Wein» and Heidegger's essays «Wozu Dichter» or «Das Wesen der Dichtung» *inter alia.*

[8] I do not mean to argue that Walcott drew either intentionally or unwittingly from the discussions of the Rectification of Names in the *Analects* (*Lun yü*), *The Book of Rites* (*Li ji*), or other sources, but rather that he is concerned with the new use of old words just as Confucius advocated the correct use of old words. Given the prominence of Asian immigrants generally and specifically those from China in Walcott's poetry, it is certainly not impossible that some popularized version of the doctrine of the Rectification of Names could have become part of the Antillean popular culture.

[9] Obviously critiques of the subject and subjectivism abound in great profusion in philosophy, psychology, literary theory, and cultural criticism. See Cadava for a recent attempt to assess the current developments in the area and suggest directions for continuing inquiry.

[10] Benveniste addressed a relatively narrow audience in the field of theoretical linguistics, but, as has happened with so many other linguists, his insights have proven very useful in philosophic and literary-critical circles. The essay from which this passage is taken, «La Nature des pronoms», originally appeared in a *Festschrift* (1965) but has since been published along with several of his other essays in English translation in *Problems of General Linguistics* and has been excerpted from that volume for inclusion in anthologies of contemporary literary theory.

[11] The locative dimensions of personal pronouns are important and cannot be dismissed lightly. Heidegger touches on the matter in *Sein und Zeit*: «Und sogar wenn das Dasein sich selbst ausdrücklich anspricht als: Ich-hier, dann muß die örtliche Personbestimmung aus der existenzialen Räumlichkeit des Daseins verstanden werden. Bei der Interpretation dieser deuteten wir schon an, daß dieses Ich-hier nicht einen ausgezeichneten Punkt des Ichdinges meint, sondern sich versteht als In-Sein aus dem Dort der zuhandenen Welt, bei dem Dasein als *Besorgen* sich aufhält» (119). Heidegger calls attention to an 1829 essay of Wilhelm von Humboldt in which the locative aspects of pronouns are discussed: «Über die Verwandtschaft der Ortsadverbien mit dem Pronomen in einigen Sprachen».

[12] Homi K. Bhabha discusses this aspect of the poem with great insight in *The Location of Culture* (231-35). Although I disagree with him about the significance of the nominal as opposed to the pronominal, I find his comments most informative.

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