

M. Travis Lane

## AT HOME IN HOMELESSNESS: THE POETRY OF

### DEREK WALCOTT

The West Indies have recently produced a very distinguished group of writers; the best of these, Derek Walcott, poet and playwright, is one of the best living poets in English. Far from being a celebrator of quaint peasants, or maker of patriotic myths, and equally far from being a generalist of the poetic imagination, Walcott, in his intensely West Indian English, has returned eloquence and human dignity to verse and to the modern stage.

The titles of Derek Walcott's two most recent collections of poetry, *The Castaway* and *The Gulf*, not only imply something about the West Indian, post-colonial condition, the isolation and the estrangement of Crusoe's abandoned Fridays, they also come to stand for the general condition of all men. What is most local is, in this poetry, most universal, and Walcott's "gulf" is ours, our home, and our sense of homelessness.

The Gulf is, of course, a geographical place: the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, Walcott's literal home, and that particular complex of geography and history that has created his West Indian present. Born a half-white, English-speaking middle-class Methodist on the largely Roman Catholic island of St. Lucia, where the black poor tell half-African stories in French patois, Walcott early interested himself in the possibilities for theatre in his multiple inheritance. With his brother he has founded several dramatic companies, notably the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, which he has run for the past eleven years. The best of his earliest poetry was collected in 1962 in his fourth book of verse, *In a Green Night*. Since then he has brought out *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) and *The Gulf* (1969). Outside the West Indies Walcott is perhaps best known for his most recent play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*,

first produced in the Central Library Theatre, Toronto, August 12, 1967, and recently brought to New York. This play, his most ambitious work, and three others, all centrally concerned with the definition of the West Indian state of mind, *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958), *Malcochon, or The Six in the Rain* (1969), were published together in 1970.

A central theme in all Walcott's writing, and the subject of his most recent book of poetry is "the gulf"—not just the isolation and estrangement of the post-slavery, post-colonial West Indies, but a state of mind—not just the Gulf of Mexico, but the gulfs within which we all live, the divisions of history, geography, race, class, philosophy—and the gulfs within us, the divided loyalties of the honest man. *In a Green Night* worked with the problems of finding ourselves the spiritual or literal descendants and inheritors of our mixed and quarreling ancestors. *The Castaway* worked with the themes of colonial isolation: the need of the colonially educated to create an idea of self, to recover from colonialism's denigrations. *The Gulf* is not only about the post-colonial condition, it is about isolation, estrangement, abandonment, and division as types of homelessness, of homelessness at home, homelessness which is home. Yet for all the sadness of these themes, *The Gulf* ends with a triumph.

For what Walcott announced as his desire for his plays is equally true of his poetry—that they should share something of the vigorously life-affirming quality of the warrior's wake-dance, "the bongo", which, according to Walcott, represents the warrior's dance of triumph over death: it is a "foot-asserting, earth-asserting, life-asserting dance in contradiction of the grief".<sup>1</sup> The triumph of a wake-dance can only be real if the funeral is real.

Wake-dances that include a real funeral are no popular sport. The popular poet is usually the poet who compliments his audience with celebrations of its myths, not the poet who depresses the audience with images of its grief. Myth-celebrating poets such as Whitman, Frost, and the West Indian Braithwaite are often popularly misunderstood as patriotic distortions of their verse, and, their darker complexities having been conveniently forgotten, their simpler poems are often used by reviewers as weapons against less patriotic, more alienated verse.

For the patriot stands in the centre of his universe. But where the sense of gulf is central, the identities are divided; the sympathies are located in the division. A mask may be either Black or White, but the face in the mirror is brown. The man in the mirror inherits not Carnival, the holiday of masks, but Lent. And the unpopularity of Lent creates, as consequence, a gulf be-

tween Lenten poet and Carnival people, a gulf which is one of the major themes of *The Gulf*.

Two poems from *The Gulf*, "Mass Man" and the closing poem "Hic Jacet", represent Walcott's fullest exploration of the gulf between popular art and the meditative poet. "Mass Man" is an introduction to the problem. The poem begins with Carnival: "mass: puns with "mas"—the colloquial for "mask".

Through a great lion's head clouded by mange  
a black clerk growls,  
Next, a gold-wired peacock withholds a man,  
a fan, flaunting its oval, jewelled eyes;  
What metaphors!  
What coruscating, mincing fantasies!

Hector Mannix, waterworks clerk, San Juan, has entered a lion,  
Boysie, two golden mangoes bobbing for breastplates, barges  
like Cleopatra down her river, making style.  
"Join us", they shout, "O God, child, you can't dance?"  
but somewhere in that whirlwind's radiance  
a child, rigged like a bat, collapses, sobbing.

The masks of these dancers furnish their myth. Hector's name is part of his dancing—Hector: the Greek warrior. That his name is, thus, inspired by the Greek classics rather than by African myth reflects his European-colonial inheritance. Hector combined with Mannix is a doubly manly name, a swaggering name (though the suffix is a trifle suggestive of the diminutive). And Hector is a great name for a lion, that most manly and war-like King of Beasts, emblem of Ethiopia, Great Britain, and Hollywood alike, those creators of dreams, of Carnival. And, like royalty, Hector, too, has his titles recited after his name. The half-rhymes and the calypso rhythm accentuate the put-down. And the lion mask is mangy.

Note that Hector is not *disguised* as a lion, nor is he *pretending* to be a lion; he has *entered* a lion. This is place, in his imagination; he is possessing the lion as a spirit might possess a man, as a man might possess a vision of himself. But, within the royal lion of England, Africa, and Hollywood, only a "black clerk growls".

The second and third costumes of "Mass Man" are also romantic masks. The peacock which "withholds a man", almost denying the dancer within it, is, also, a foreign elegance and royal emblem. The peacock is the bird of

India, primarily, and as the lion glamorizes the black slave, the peacock glamorizes the East Indian coolie. The third dancer, Boysie, is Cleopatra, African queen, Earth mother, again royal, again foreign. Walcott revitalizes the colloquial phrase "making style" with its literal meaning; the dancers are making style; this is their art. And Walcott does not say they are not dancing beautifully. Walcott once remarked of the detractors of his verses, "they are not talking about character, they are insisting you develop a style they like".<sup>2</sup> The style they like is the style they are making; the poetic speaker is not making the style they like: "O God, child, you can't dance?"

For the fourth costume of "Mass Man" is the child's. The child is dressed as a fruit bat, a local creature, not glamorous, not powerful, not colourful—but dusky, feeble, penitential. And the child is crying: "But I am dancing". Tears are the dance. The "metronome" to which the mourner dances are the memories Carnival ignores, but the Lent that Carnival betokens: the gibbet, the bull-whip, the untended child: the histories of slavery, imprisonment, and neglect, the colonial past and present. And here, too is the hanged man, who was despised, who was betrayed, who was imprisoned, for whose death we mourn in the ashes and funeral colours of Lent, whose mania is not the pocomania where we are ridden by the spirit gods of our own imagination, but the mania of God's peace which is no peace:

But I am dancing, from an old gibbet  
my bull-whipped body swings, a metronome!  
Like a fruit-bat dropped in the silk-cotton's shade,  
my mania, my mania is a terrible calm.

Upon your penitential morning,  
some skull must rub its memory with ashes,  
some mind must squat down howling in your dust,  
some hand must crawl and recollect your rubbish,  
someone must write your poems.

Walcott's presentation of the historical past in terms of present suffering, local and natural imagery, and Lenten Christian overtones, makes this Ash Wednesday reply to Carnival an assertion of truth against the dreams of glamour. Mass man may prefer the mask; but this poetry is mirror.

ii

Lenten reality is not just an inheritance from the past; it includes the obligations of the future, as the opening poem of *The Gulf*, "Ebb", suggests.

Like "Mass Man", "Ebb" is concerned with the distance between the unglamorous everyday existence, with its sufferings and its fears, and the alluring glamour of the far-away or the impossible. "Ebb" opposes three images, a palm grove, representing natural piety or the "sacred woods" of home, a schooner struggling to the horizon, which suggests ambition and the desire to leave home, and the highway-treadmill to work that "we" must remain on. The beautiful and beloved palm grove is going to be bulldozed because the island needs the money. And the glimpsed schooner is not only out too far by now for the speaker to identify with, but it is, and always has been in some way crippled. At first the island itself seems to have ensnared the schooner, as a would-be exile feels chained by home loves and by home's poverty. But as the schooner escapes the island it is seen as if caught again, this time by the "thinned", "washed-up" less radiant than real, undream-like moon. The schooner appears to have wanted to fly, but the dreams of flight were impossible. Both what is dearest to us in staying here, the sacred wood, and what is dearest to us in leaving here, ambition—are mortgaged to economic and social necessity. "Ebb" concludes:

For safety, each sunfall,  
the wildest of us all  
mortgages life to fear.

And why not? From this car  
there's terror enough in the habitual,  
miracle enough in the familiar. Sure. . . .

iii

For the man of the gulf is estranged from his past, from nature, and from his dreams for the future. Yet along with this sense of estrangement is a contradictory sense of human closeness. For a gulf is no void; it lies between things and includes their shores. As "Ruins of a Great House" (from *In a Green Night*) recalls from Donne, no man is an island:

Ablaze with rage, I thought  
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,  
And still the coal of my compassion fought:  
That Albion too, was once  
A colony like ours, 'Part of the continent, piece of the main'  
Nook-shotten, rook o'er blown, deranged  
By foaming channels, and the vain expense  
of bitter faction.

All in compassion ends  
 So differently from what the heart arranged:  
 'as well as if a manor of thy friend's. . . .'

Walcott, half-white and a slave's descendant, refuses nothing of his inheritance, but affirms it all, the several speech patterns, the several religions, the several cultural traditions, the separated and severing histories. The bilingualism of his inheritance is not mongrel but imperial. Whether writing in standard English, as in most of his poetry, or in a created dialect reflecting the patois of his French-speaking peasants, as in most of his plays, the compassionate nobility of the speech is the same—as when the reprobate *isolato* Chantal, dying, refuses to send for the priest:

The priest might lose his faith listening to the madness of an old thief. Only God, who have a strong stomach and who is a very old man, an old rascal like me who frightening the world, could understand that, so don't mind about the priest.

(from *Malcochon, or The Six in the Rain*)

Written as they are in the voice of the "folk", Walcott's plays can speak of God as existing, whereas the speaker in Walcott's poetry is agnostic. The little hymn at the end of *Malcochon* is not unbelieved or unbelievable: it is the feeling at the heart of Walcott's vision of grief:

The rage of the beast is taken for granted,  
 Man's beauty is sharing his brother's pain;  
 God sends the wound where the wound is wanted,  
 This is the story of six in the rain.

iv

The dignity of Walcott's dramatic characters and the finely complex and compassionate vision of man in his plays are rooted in Walcott's experience of the "gulf". In Walcott's poetry the point of view and the poetic speaker are the same, and the fine intelligence that produced the plays speaks directly to the reader in his own voice. The speech style is different, but the message is the same: an affirmation of human dignity that includes a perception of the "funeral"—the "bongo", the warrior's wake-dance. Walcott's most impressive affirmation, in his poems, is perhaps his most hopeless work, the despairing elegy "The Gulf", which sees the murder of President Kennedy as prelude to racial war.

Like Shakespeare or Donne, Walcott puns gravely throughout "The Gulf", and the wit of his associations is the driving force of the tight, multi-

leveled structure. As the poetic speaker leaves Dallas, where he has been visiting friends, and the jet flies along the Gulf edge of the American south, he reacts to the just-announced murder of the President. Each of the three sections of the poem begins with an effort to detach the mind from the pain of thought; each section ends with the image of death regaining control over thought. In the first section death is seen as the destroyer, the destroyer of man's loves, the destroyer of man's works, the destroyer of the great. But the "Lycidas"-like self-concern of the speaker lessens in the second section. For, as the jet plane leaves Dallas and friends behind, and the Gulf circles below it, death presents itself more generally as distance, as history, and as the long past of fraternal, civil, racial war. In the third section, the awareness of history turns to prophecy; the gulf of war is foreseen.

The speaker's effort to achieve the detached, the objective view is seen, ironically, as both a spiritual exercise and the results of emotional fatigue.

Sour, unshaven, dreading the exertion  
of tightening, racked nerves fuelled with liquor,  
  
some smoky, resinous Bourbon,  
the body, buckling at its casket hole,  
a roar like last night's blast racing its engines,  
watches the fumes of the exhausted soul  
as the trans-Texas jet, screeching begins  
its flight and friends diminish. So, to be aware  
  
of the divine union the soul detaches  
itself from created things. . . .

This sort of detachment also gives an objective over-view of the distanced situation: the gulf—death, racial division, the histories of hate. And this detaching oneself from created things is also a type of dying. We strap up in the casket hole with its glass window beyond which bubble the clouds of history, and love detaches its gifts from us as we take off, die away from the loves of the world, into the divine union—death's union, which is division, or Lincoln's, which is divided.

Images of war—the bullet, the military uniform, military band music—and riot fires in the ghettos—are balanced against images of love and innocence: the rose given to the speaker by a Dallas child at dawn, the beautiful earth itself, friends, angels, the Gulf. And the city of Dallas is innocent: its airport, Love Field, wounded by the murder of Kennedy, becomes synecdoche for the city of friends in which hate and murder exist also, but do not negate each

other. It is, of course, typical of Walcott that he, unlike so many, did not feel obliged to accuse all Dallas of murder. For Dallas is not foreign territory to the man of the Gulf, it is a familiar miracle as well as a place of familiar terror.

What was willed  
on innocent, sun-streaked Dallas, the beast's claw  
curled around that hairspring rifle is revealed  
on every page as lunacy or feral law;  
circling that wound we leave Love Field.

In the second section of the poem Walcott uses the jet's window glass to play with St. Paul's "we see now as in a glass darkly" but without the saint's affirmation "but then face to face". The clarity and the detachment of glass is, instead, "the image of our pain". The beautiful blue and grey world seen from the jet as "peeled of her cerements" combines with the awareness of mounting racial violence to colour the imagination with the blue and grey of the uniforms of the American civil war, that most brotherly battle, and with that war's music:

through that grey, fading massacre a blue  
light-hearted creek flutes of some siege  
to the amnesia of drumming water.  
Their cause is crystalline: the divine union  
of these detached, divided States whose slaughter  
darkens each summer now. . . .

Thus the "divine union" of the first section of the poem puns with the non-union of the States in the second section. As the poem continues, the "smoke of bursting ghettos clouds the glass", and we recognize that the clouds of earth seen through the jet window appear, punningly, as the clouds of racial war:

where filling-station signs  
proclaim the Gulf, an air, heavy with gas,  
sickens the state, from Newark to New Orleans.

"Yet the South felt like home" begins the third section. Yet the homeliness only increases the sense of pain by making it more personal. The "strange, familiar soil"

prickled and barbed the texture of my hair,  
my status as a secondary soul.  
The Gulf, your gulf, is daily widening. . . .



Increased consciousness of racial prejudice brings on the terrible prophecy:

each blood-red rose warns of that coming night  
 when there's no rock cleft to go hidin' in  
 and all the rocks catch fire, when that black might,  
 their stalking, moonless panthers turn from Him  
 whose voice they can no more believe, when the black X's  
 mark their passover with slain seraphim.

The rose of love (taking up again the Dallas rose) becomes a sign of blood. Religion will provide no rock, and the Passover of the Angel of Death, when God punished the Egyptians for enslaving the Jews, will occur again. Punning relates black X's, Malcolm X's, black Christs (since X is Christ), X as anonymous man, the black or invisible man, and X as crucifix, the mark of persecution, with the sign SOUL BROTHER put up, like the passover lamb's blood, against the angels of death, black angels, in riot times.

Among the several animals which can represent Christ in the bestiary, lion, lamb, dove, the panther is also, by tradition, Christ. But these black panthers turn away from the Christ in whom they can not believe because He preached the brotherly love they did not receive. The disappointed X's "mark their passover with slain seraphim". Angels will kill angels. The black angels of death will kill the white angels. But the seraphim are, also, the innocent of any race who will die in such a war. This is not a war of Lucifer against Gabriel, because God is not seen as on one side or the other. Nor, out of such a war, can there be any victory for man. Nor will the speaker go home from such a vision:

The Gulf shines, dull as lead. The coast of Texas  
 glints like a metal rim. I have no home  
 as long as summer bubbling to its head  
 boils for that day when in the Lord God's name  
 the coals of fire are heaped upon the head  
 of all whose gospel is the whip and flame.  
 age after age, the uninstructing dead.

The whip and the flame—and we think of both the slave-owner's whip and the revolutionist's flame. For as long as this gulf exists, home is the wounded field of love, and we have not yet left home. Home *is* this history uninstructed by the dead. Home is this homelessness.

## V

Walcott's characteristic identification of man's home as within chaos, and of chaos as human, can be most succinctly illustrated by comparing four poems rather similarly addressed to the solitary, unilluminating star of twilight, Stevens' "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" (which gives us Williams' poem as well), Frost's "Choose Something Like a Star", and Walcott's "Star".

The Williams-Stevens and Frost poems are very similar; each represents the speaker as feeling fortified by the sense of distance and detachment he gets from observing a star which appears to be unrelated to and uninterested in the trivia of the human situation.

*It's a strange courage  
you give me, ancient star:  
Shine alone in the sunrise  
toward which you lend no part!*

## I

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,  
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part  
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing

## II

Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses  
you in its own light.  
Be not chimera of morning,  
Half-man, half-star.  
Be not an intelligence,  
Like a widow's bird  
Or an old horse.

Wallace Stevens, "Nuances of a Theme by Williams"

The Frost poem similarly remarks on the star's unending nature:

Say something! And it says, 'I burn'.  
But say with what degree of heat.  
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.  
Use language we can comprehend.  
Tell us what elements you blend.  
It gives us strangely little aid,  
But does tell something in the end.  
And steadfast as Keats' Eremité,

Not even stooping from its sphere,  
 It asks a little of us here.  
 It asks of us a certain height,  
 So when at times the mob is swayed  
 To carry praise or blame too far,  
 We may choose something like a star  
 To stay our minds on and be staid.

Robert Frost, "Choose Something Like a Star"

These stars are detached from mob opinion and bourgeois sentimentalities; their fortifying effect is intellectual. Although both Stevens and Frost often refer to nature as being a chaos, the chaoses of their philosophies were merely the chaoses of nature, God-less and perhaps but partially formed, but not humanly or centrally evil. For neither Stevens nor Frost much felt the chaos of human social relations as central to their sensibility. And, although the nature of these earlier poets may have been formless and murky, the minds of these poets were commonly represented by them as sources of light, starry, in fact. And of course the natural chaos these agnostics perceived logically obliged their stars to have nothing to say. Although neither Stevens nor Williams nor Frost ever consistently took in their other poems the extreme anti-symbolic position of these star poems, they did, on the whole, tend to scour their images of "that which humanity has suffused in its own light". "Make it new", they remembered. For them the poetic imagination was the maker of form, the source of light; they invented the meanings and admitted the invention.

But chaos is human in Walcott's poetry, and, if only on the logical ground that man can only perceive nature through his own humanity, Walcott's nature is suffused with humane memories, humane suggestions, humane symbols—and is chaos only when we feel it so. Since our mind is where we are, if beauty feels compassionate it is compassionate, and beauty's compassion is part of our reality. Baudelaire was right: the pillars of nature's temple do respond to us in a mysterious but half understandable speech. And the morning star is, in Stevens' denying words, "chimera of the morning, half-man, half-star". But it is a real star.

If, in the light of things, you fade  
 real, yet wanly withdrawn  
 to our determined and appropriate  
 distance, like the moon left on

all night among the leaves, may  
 you invisibly delight this house,  
 O star, doubly compassionate, who came  
 too soon for twilight, too late  
 for dawn, may your pale flame  
 direct the worst in us  
 through chaos  
 with the passion of  
 plain day.

Derek Walcott, "Star"

Among the several clusters of suggestion in this poem there is the religious: that which is real, yet faded in the light of "things", distanced from us by our choice, yet a source of delight (more than light), compassionate, directing the worst in us (as sinners, residents of the chaos around us) with the passion of plain day. The day star is traditionally Christ, whose passion of love and pain is our light and delight, and whose passion is also our plain, our ordinary, daily bread. But the day star is also Venus, the goddess of love, beauty, and sexual passion. And the star is also a real star, a benefit of morning, a light to the imagination. And the star is something or anything beautiful but more remembered than perceived. The star is something of the principle of compassion itself.

"Still we belong here. There's Venus. We are not yet lost". From a different Walcott poem ("Lampfall") but it is the same star, and the same plain passions: distance, lostness, closeness—and the compassions of earth's beauty and human love.

The last poem of *The Gulf*, "Hic Jacet", again asserts the at-homeness of the speaker with the particular pain of plain day with its rooted and familiar love. Though there is "no home" within the gulf, within the chaos of evil; although there "are homecomings without home" (from "Homecoming: Anse La Raye") when the artist's work is ignored or not wanted, when, as poet, he is exiled from the unthinking; though home contains pain and loss and isolation—it is, Walcott avers, the right place, the right subject—the true self. In "Hic Jacet" this Gulf, this "grey tub steaming with clouds of seraphim", the miraculous angels of the "ordinary earth"—is the place where, losing one's sense of home, losing one's self, one is reborn.

You must be born again to find yourself, says the Bible. You must be born again of the water; you must be washed clean, you must be washed away,

you must be drowned. And be born again of the water. Gulf water. For so the poet is born again, refound in his sense of lostness. For he knows that being so lost and so reborn, invisible to the people among whom he sinks, he can be reborn as a greater artist and as a greater worker for their common weal, as a greater speaker for their true selves, the faces under the lion masks, than any mere politician or popularist. Why return from the Big World to the tiny island? Why return to be cast away, ignored, unpopular.

Convinced of the power of provincialism,  
 I yielded quietly my knowledge of the world  
 to a grey tub steaming with clouds of seraphim,  
 the angels and flags of the world,  
 and answer those who hiss, like steam, of exile,  
 this coarse soap-smelling truth:  
 I sought more power than you, more fame than yours,  
 I was more hermetic, I knew the commonweal,  
 I pretended subtly to lose myself in crowds  
 knowing my passage would alter their reflection,  
 I was that muscle shouldering the grass  
 through ordinary earth,  
 commoner than water I sank to lose my name,  
 this was my second birth.

And Walcott has altered their reflection—their face in the mirror—our face in the mirror. Ti-Jean the littlest, Makak the monkey, Chantal the thief and poet in the forest, Hector the clerk and Boysie—all lost in the wilderness, castaway in the gulf, lonely and poor—are reborn.

A ghost steps from you, my grandfather's ghost!  
 Uprooted from some rainy English shire,  
 you sought your Roman  
 End in suicide by fire.  
 Your mixed son gathered your charred black bones  
 in a child's coffin.  
 And buried them himself on a strange coast.  
 Sire,  
 why do I raise you up? Because  
 Your house has voices, your burnt house,  
 shrills with unguessed, lovely inheritors,  
 your geneological roof tree, fallen survives,  
 like seasoned timber through green, little lives.

I ripen towards your twilight, sir, that dream  
where I am singed in that sea-crossing, steam  
towards that vaporous world, whose souls,  
like pressured trees brought diamonds out of coals.

(from "Veranda", *The Castaway*)

Out of a wrecked past, green voices; out of a history of hate, an extension of love; out of the gulf, an island: a home in homelessness.

#### NOTES

1. Derek Walcott, "Meanings", *Savacou*, I (September 1970), 48-9.
2. Derek Walcott, "Walcott on Walcott", *Caribbean Quarterly* XIV (March-June 1968), 78.