

“The Sea Is History”:

Reading Derek Walcott Through a Melancholic Lens

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INTRODUCTION:

**SITUATING THE MELANCHOLIC POET IN A POSTCOLONIAL
CARIBBEAN**

Born in 1930 in the island of St. Lucia, Derek Walcott is a poet who continues to inspire contemporary literary scholarship. However, an overwhelming majority of this criticism appears to merely praise and broadly categorize his work as a Caribbean writer, thus missing some of the very key ways in which he engages and grapples with issues of postcolonial Caribbean identity. Specifically, most critics have either overlooked or misinterpreted the tragic elements of his poetry. This thesis seeks to analyze the form and content of Walcott's inherently melancholic relationship with history¹ and how this sense of anguish shapes the way he discusses history itself, landscape, and the characters in his verse. On a more complex level, it also seeks to connect these traumatic implications to the development of his post-

¹ A brief background on Caribbean history would be salient to an analysis of Walcott's work. The Caribbean is composed of over 7,000 islands and in 1492, Christopher Columbus became the first European to visit them. The term West Indies originated from his trip. Shortly after, in 1496, the Spanish established the first settlement on Hispaniola and the English, French, and Dutch had also made settlements in the islands by the mid 1600s. After the effective extermination of the indigenous population by European colonists, the African slave trade was introduced for the purpose of sugar production and for centuries afterward, the horrors and brutality of slavery reigned in the Caribbean. During the colonial period, the Caribbean was successfully exploited by these European imperial powers and the islands were essentially used as pawns in a struggle for international dominance. The fragmentation of the Caribbean region that resulted from the aftermath of such a history, even following the independence of some islands, is a brokenness that encompasses Walcott's poetry. For a more comprehensive overview of the history of the Caribbean, see: Franklin Knight, The Caribbean: the Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

colonial and artistic identities throughout the period covered in his *Collected Poems: 1948-1984*.²

Walcott's work remains distinct, for example, from three of his more prominent contemporaries: Edward Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, and Edouard Glissant. In their essays, these three writers express distinctly different (although sometimes overlapping) ideas about the state of Caribbean literature and the role and responsibility of the Caribbean writer. According to Brathwaite, Caribbean intellectuals tend to fall into three categories. The first type desires to move away or migrate from the Caribbean because of the lack of culture or tradition (what Brathwaite refers to as "cultural poverty") in his native land. In *Roots*, Brathwaite cites examples from works by V.S. Naipaul and Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*, commenting that "the desire (even the need) to migrate is at the heart of West Indian sensibility – whether that migration is in fact or by metaphor." Brathwaite then continues to describe a second kind of writer who remains in the Caribbean, but "rests" in hopelessness and is unable to "distance" himself from the "poverty of his environment." Here, the author references the work of Walcott, contrasting his melancholia with the idealism of the final type of writer, who is able to "continue because of heritage." This writer is "in possession of a fact, a

² Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986). Individual poems will be cited in the text by year and with the relevant page numbers. These poems include "Prelude," "A Far Cry from Africa" (1962), "Tales of the Islands" (1962), and "Origins" (1964) from *In A Green Night*, "Codicil," "Crusoe's Journal," "Verandah," and "Laventille" (1965) from *The Castaway and Other Poems*, "Exile," "Air," "Guyana," "Homecoming: Anse La Raye" (1969) from *The Gulf and Other Poems*, "New World," "Adam's Song," "Names," "Sainte Lucie," "Sea Canes" (1976) from *Sea Grapes*, and "The Schooner *Flight*," "The Sea Is History," "The Star-Apple Kingdom" (1979) from *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, and *Another Life* (1973).

feeling, that aligns him with folk, with peasant tradition” and Brathwaite aligns himself with this characteristic. Instead of attempting to flee from the islands or remaining while continuously wrestling with the tensions that exist there, Brathwaite, like fellow poet E.M. Roach (“a writer, truly ... of the people”) thrives in what he calls the Caribbean’s “folk culture.”³ Brathwaite praises the writer who is able to successfully recover from the sadness that holds others back because his optimism contributes to the progress of the Caribbean.

This idea of achieving “progress” for the islands is also inherent to George Lamming’s The Pleasures of Exile.⁴ In “The Occasion for Speaking,” he explains the West Indian writer’s desire to move abroad and also addresses the problematic aspects of remaining behind:

In the Caribbean we have a glorious opportunity of making some valid and permanent contribution to man’s life in this century. But we must stand up; and we must move ... already I feel that I have had it (as a writer) ... [that] I have lost my place, or my place has deserted me. This may be the dilemma of the West Indian writer abroad: that he hungers for nourishment from a soil which he (as an ordinary citizen) could not at present endure.⁵

Lamming describes an unbearable situation for the West Indian in the Caribbean who feels he must depart in order to feel at home again. He asserts, “I have lost my place, or my place has deserted me” and calls this irony “the pleasure and paradox of my own exile.”⁶ Lamming continues to argue that

³ Kamau Brathwaite, Roots (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 7, 13, 14, 15, 16.

⁴ George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (London: Allison & Busby Limited), 1984.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

the root of the West Indian writer's struggle is the Caribbean's history of colonialism, a history that has not only fragmented his sense of identity, but continued to oppress through the avenue of language. He writes,

Colonialism is the very base and structure of the West Indian's cultural awareness ... I am not much interested in what the West Indian writer has brought to the English language ... A more important consideration is what the West Indian novelist has brought to the West Indies. That is the real question; and its answer can be the beginning of an attempt to grapple with that colonial structure of awareness which has determined West Indian values.⁷

In this sense, the responsibility of the Caribbean writer lies not necessarily in his attempts to reconcile with the problematic aspects of a post-colonial experience, but rather, in his "attempt to grapple" with the "awareness" of this predicament. Lamming embraces a more political approach to writing, tracing the Caribbean writer's struggle to articulate his experience directly to colonialism. Unlike Brathwaite, he does not view migration as a form of escape, but rather as a necessary form of coping, given the postcolonial subject's inability to "endure" his own soil. Nor does Lamming find the solution to this struggle simply in reviving the "folk culture" of the Caribbean, for he argues that even this culture is overly influenced by remnants of European imperialism.

Like Brathwaite and Lamming, Glissant believes that exile, or the desire to leave the Caribbean, is unavoidable: "The truth is that exile is within us from the outset, and is even more corrosive because we have not managed to drive it into the open with our precarious assurances nor have we succeeded

⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

all together in dislodging it here. All Caribbean poetry is a witness to this.” However, he believes that the fight against exile is finished and the “task” at hand for the modern Caribbean writer is “reintegration”: “Not the generalized power of the scream, but the painstaking survey of the land. And also this convergence of histories that we must today recognize in the Caribbean.”⁸ Therefore, whereas Brathwaite believes in the existence of “heritage” within the Caribbean and Lamming is primarily concerned with the colonial past, Glissant is occupied with what remains or what he refers to as the “painstaking survey of the land.” After assessing the remains, he sees poetry as a tool for the development and future progress of the Caribbean. The Caribbean writer must encourage the people of his culture to avoid the “domination of uncertainty and ambiguity” provided by years of colonialism and instead, declare his own identity by “writing the world into existence.”⁹ Writing as a form of self-expression thus declares one’s existence.

As an essayist, Walcott shares many ideas with these three contemporaries, in regards to the Caribbean peoples’ need to claim a language of their own rather than that of their colonizer’s, the multiple social, cultural, and economic problems colonialism left in the islands, and the Caribbean writer’s role as a revolutionary hero who must use his words to restore a Caribbean sense of identity. However, it is not a desire to escape from the islands that is evidenced in his poetry but rather a longing to reconcile his multiple cultural identifications with Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. This

⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* trans. J. Michael Dash, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989) 153-154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165, 169.

ache is especially reflected in the poems that deal with the Caribbean landscape.

While I recognize the importance of situating Walcott further in the context of other post-colonial Caribbean writers and scholars, the primary focus of this thesis is to rectify an error that dominates the literary scholarship of his work. Although literary critics have recognized and explored Walcott's use of tragedy, they have missed the deeper, more complex issue of his constant engagement with sadness and grief. When they do discuss these latter sentiments, they believe that Walcott uses his verse to resolve and recover from trauma when in fact melancholy is the pivot upon which his poetry moves. In essence, this thesis critically examines a select number of Walcott's poems against other academic studies, while maintaining a central argument that addresses the pervasiveness of melancholy throughout these poems and the greater implications that sadness has on discussions of history, time, memory, myth, the Caribbean landscape, and the modern Caribbean.

One critic who identifies Walcott's particularly traumatic relationship with the historical context of the Caribbean is Roy Osamu Kamada, who directly addresses and examines the specific sources of Walcott's grief in his essay, "Postcolonial Romanticisms: Derek Walcott and the Melancholic Narrative of Landscape."¹⁰ According to Kamada, Walcott simply cannot detach himself from the Caribbean landscape's colonial history and as a result, "must directly acknowledge the history of St. Lucia and the Caribbean, the

¹⁰ Roy Osamu Kamada, "Postcolonial Romanticisms: Derek Walcott and the Melancholic Narrative of Landscape," *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City : University of Utah Press, 2002).

history of diaspora, of slavery, of the capitalist commodification of the landscape, and the devastating consequences this history has on the individual.”¹¹ He continues to contend that within this melancholic relationship, Walcott “nevertheless seeks redemption and resolution and the establishment of a postcolonial identity capable of containing the multiple histories of trauma and beauty.”¹² Yet, the poet’s perpetual sadness also signifies his dread of the responsibility to articulate this loss and Kamada misses this crucial aspect of his melancholy. At times, Walcott perceives his poetic gift as a burden; he feels responsible for “providing a voice” to both displaced peoples and histories but is not satisfied with his contribution. This overwhelming sense of accountability greatly contributes to the lingering despondency that is characteristic of Walcott’s writing.

To further investigate aspects of mourning and melancholia in Walcott’s work, we shall turn to the classic psychoanalytic discussion of those conditions in Freud’s influential essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”¹³ Here, Freud establishes that “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on.” Although melancholia may also stem from the loss of a “loved object,” Freud further explains that the loss is “of a more ideal kind.” The shift from the lost object

¹¹ Ibid., 209.

¹² Ibid., 213.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1961).

to the lost ideal distinguishes melancholia from mourning. Freud argues that while mourning involves the subject grieving over something external, melancholia is a significantly more internalized struggle, for

. . . one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.

In melancholia, the internalization of loss lends it a semi-permanence in the subject's psyche. That is, while in mourning there exists an active relationship between the subject and the object of loss, allowing the subject to "move on" from the loss itself, in contrast to the external qualities of mourning melancholia lingers; the subject is unable to detach himself from his own internal struggle. Even more significant is Freud's assertion that "the complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound." This open wound serves as a glaring and constant reminder of everything that is associated with both the lost object *and* the lost ideal. It represents the ultimate pain endured by the subject.¹⁴

The "open wound" that Freud describes in psychoanalytic terms is further elucidated and developed by Walter Benjamin in a historical and theoretical context in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History."¹⁵ Benjamin describes it as "a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical

¹⁴ Ibid., 243, 245, 245, 253.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

image as it flares up briefly.”¹⁶ The sadness that Benjamin describes as a “despair” of ever grasping “the genuine historical image” can also be translated into a kind of desperation on the part of the subject. This idea, paired with Benjamin’s concept of history as “time filled by the presence of the now” connects Benjamin’s ideas to those of Freud.¹⁷ Benjamin’s theory of history complements Freud’s discussion of the constancy of an open emotional wound by suggesting that one can have a similar, semi-permanent, and constant engagement with the past. Words such as “broken” and “despair” characterize Benjamin’s own interpretation of melancholy, as that which results from the impossible desire of retaining the “genuine historical image.”

Much of Walcott’s imagery is concerned with the “remains” of the Caribbean and its inhabitants. Throughout his work, he establishes himself as the poet responsible for articulating the Caribbean’s condition of loss and the Caribbean individual’s lost cultural identity. His poetry is revolutionary not simply in the sense of creating “newness,” but in its revolutionary reconstruction of an identity that must occur without a known or “genuine” cultural history. As David Eng and David Kazanjian explain in the introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, “This attention to remains generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than

¹⁶ Ibid., 256.

¹⁷ Ibid., 261.

solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary.”¹⁸ This notion of remains is especially pertinent to Walcott’s work as he has often been under attack by fellow Caribbean writers, namely Brathwaite, for ignoring the present collective and retreating into an individual exile and profound attachment to the past.¹⁹ On the contrary, Walcott’s encompassing concern for the past, present, *and* the future evinces his commitment to change and reconstruction.

The present study suggests that Walcott uses the poetic form to “reconstruct,” rather than “reclaim” or “recreate” a fractured or lost cultural and historical identity. A “re-creation” or “re-invention” suggests the abandonment of something old (as Patricia Ismond describes) for something new whereas a “reconstruction” recognizes the need to replace something that is missing.²⁰ According to the definitions of “mourning” and “melancholia” Freud provides, re-creation would be the “abandonment” of something in search of another while reconstruction seeks to actively restore something to its original equivalent. Walcott’s struggle to re-construct (not re-create) a Caribbean history or identity is precisely what yields his seemingly permanent melancholy, stemming from this loss. Critics who approach Walcott as a poet who has mourned or is presently mourning his loss, also suggesting that his present melancholic state is both transient and temporary, miss the very key features that distinguishes Walcott from other poets and writers of his generation.

¹⁸ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains,” Loss: The Politics of Mourning (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) ix.

¹⁹ Brathwaite, Roots, 13.

²⁰ Patricia Ismond, Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott’s Poetry (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001) 2.

Most literary critics, while successful at identifying Walcott's distinct poetic form and commenting on the overall tone of his expression, are unable to explain the inherent connection between his verse form and central themes. Moreover, critics tend to place an emphasis on Walcott's "recreation" of language and view his use of certain poetic tools (such as rhyme, meter, and metaphor) to "reclaim" or "recreate" a distinctive Caribbean identity. Patricia Ismond is one of the few contemporary Caribbeanist literary critics who has successfully contextualized Walcott's poetic forms within the literary, post-colonial, and theoretical context of Caribbean culture and literature through her study of his metaphors. She addresses the lack of in-depth, modern literary criticism on Walcott in her critical study, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry*, asserting, "Generally speaking, criticism has not adequately explored Walcott's Caribbean discourse as an important part of his overall achievement; and, in addition, has understated or missed his concern with Caribbean definition."²¹ Ismond specifically looks at the formative phase of Walcott's career to pinpoint the development of his cultural identity and his self-construction through the use of metaphor. However, even Ismond's work is largely focused on the premise that Walcott "abandons dead metaphors of the Old World Western tradition" and "generates fresh ones in his newer world."²² This thesis, then, differs from Ismond's intentions in that it specifically connects Walcott's literary form (for example, his use of repetition in rhyme,

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Ibid., 6.

structure, and diction) to notions of loss and mourning. Ismond places an emphasis on Walcott's metaphors to demonstrate his "new order" in re-creating a poetic "New World" that is steeped in a tradition left over from the colonial "Old World." Although this project also seeks to explore the revolutionary manner in which Walcott approaches his poetry, it instead approaches this "revolution" through the profound melancholy that pervades his work. His literary form and style then, is constructed around this sense of melancholy rather than the "abandoning [of] dead metaphors," to begin anew.

Mark McWatt, another contemporary commentator who distinctly places Walcott (and his development as a poet) in a Caribbean context, sees Walcott "in terms of his relationship to the islands and sea of the Caribbean; to the sense of people and place that awakened and forged his talent, and to the social and educational environment in which it matured."²³ McWatt also directly correlates Walcott's characters with Walcott himself, for example, seeing Shabine from "The Schooner *Flight*" (1979) as "expressing Walcott's own feelings about the islands of the Caribbean." Further, McWatt claims that it was Walcott's "great sensitivity to the literature he read at school" that "filled him with the urge to recreate his island home."²⁴ He continues to argue that Walcott "echoes the English poets he had been reading." Overall, McWatt views Walcott's work as merely a juxtaposition of Caribbean themes against the English tradition and mentions, though does not further explore, the implications of the Caribbean's own history.

²³ Mark A. McWatt, "Derek Walcott: An Island Poet and His Sea," Third World Quarterly 10:4 (1988): 1607.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1608.

But this interpretation severely limits one's understanding of the themes intrinsic to Walcott's writing – themes which include the loss of a homeland ravaged by its own tragic history and the poet's longing to root himself in certainty when there is none. In his reading of "The Schooner *Flight*," McWatt locates Walcott's feelings of nostalgia and "the sense of doubleness" in terms of his racially divided identity, but overlooks the lingering and persistent sadness that plunges deeper beyond the surface of these issues. He does not observe, for example, the raw sorrow that clutches at Shabine, often paralyzing the sailor in his dreams and emotionally wounding him in reality. Or why the visions of slave ships and ghosts of his ancestors continue to haunt Shabine while he struggles to envision the Caribbean's unlikely progress. While McWatt identifies and observes Walcott's frequent attempts to relocate and repair a missing and broken cultural identity, he struggles to specifically connect Walcott's use of form and language to a greater theoretical context.

Other literary critics are often quick to romanticize Walcott's poetry in an effort to link his lucid images to an overarching theme. Like McWatt, Peter Balakian also places Walcott in the context of his English predecessors. In his essay, "The Poetry of Derek Walcott," Balakian discusses Walcott's formal poetic structures by praising his "ability to mine traditional forms of English poetry without ever compromising his passionate energy or his language's inner music."²⁵ He also describes Walcott's use of the "warm

²⁵ Peter Balakian, "The Poetry of Derek Walcott" Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott ed. Robert Hamner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1997) 349.

Caribbean waters” as an “amniotic bath” which only further perpetuates the romantic aspect of his critical reading. Balakian formally analyzes Walcott’s poetry, focusing for example, on his use of “rhyming quatrains of iambic tetrameter” but Balakian does not offer an explanation for the importance of this particular meter to the subject matter or the poet’s diction. Instead, he views Walcott’s use of rhyming quatrains as providing a “delicate balance between Walcott’s eruptive imagination and the harnessing control of his tradition-bound intellect.”²⁶ By viewing this schism as a “delicate balance,” Balakian dismisses the presence of tension or purposeful contradiction in Walcott’s form, thus contributing to an idealized vision of Walcott’s intentions. At one point, Balakian writes, “he has managed to do what a modern epic poet must do: encompass history, myth, culture, and the personal life with the realm of aesthetic vision.”²⁷ Here, he successfully identifies four major themes of Walcott’s “poetic agenda,” but again, the importance or the implications of these themes are left unmentioned.²⁸

McWatt, Balakian, and others approach Walcott’s poetry from an idealistic perspective, obscuring the sense of tragedy in Walcott’s writing and instead perceiving his sadness as transient. Their essays lack discussions of the implications or possibilities that Walcott’s form possesses. Through this omission, these critics reveal only one dimension of Walcott’s writing. This project seeks to explore Walcott’s adamant refusal of adaptation, romanticism, or idealism and instead, reveal the generative power and creative potential of

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁸ The four themes are listed on page 351 as: “history, myth, culture, and the personal life.”

Walcott's haunting and lingering grief. This grief produces the melancholy which pervades both the form *and* function of his poetry; it also shapes his sense of his epic responsibility as a poet, his development of the mythical proportions of everyday Caribbean characters, his construction of the present "remains" left over in the landscape, and finally, his epic reconstruction of the trope of Paradise. These are the themes this thesis will address in the following chapters.

This project hopes to contribute to the current scholarship on Walcott by relating his formal poetic structure and diction to the melancholic implications of trauma and loss in the shaping of both his post-colonial and artistic identities. Chapter One begins with a brief comparison of some features of Walcott's and Brathwaite's poetry, in order to provide a context for a reading of Walcott's Caribbean poetics as the very antithesis of a poetics of idealism. The chapter then explores Walcott's use of repetition, in his use of diction, meter, and rhyme, as a tool for coping with loss. This emphasis on repetition is then connected to a greater theme of memory and the role of remembrance in Walcott's poetry as important aspects of melancholy. Themes of repetition and memory are especially prevalent in poems such as "Exile" (1969), "Names" (1976), "Codicil" (1965), "Laventille" (1965), "The Schooner *Flight*" (1979), and "Sea Canes" (1976), which are the primary focus of this chapter.

The themes of repetition and memory discussed in Chapter One shift to a different register in Chapter Two's focus on the concepts of time and

history. In this chapter I explore the despair Walcott experiences in his struggle and search for a cultural history. This chapter will incorporate Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in a discussion of poems that includes, "Prelude" (1962), "Verandah" (1965), "The Sea Is History" (1979), "The Schooner *Flight*" (1979), "The Star-Apple Kingdom" (1979), and "Origins" (1964).

The Caribbean's tragic past is then connected to the presence of myth and mythological characters in Walcott's poetry. Chapter Three examines the transference of Walcott's melancholic search for identity to characters of his own design, with particular attention paid to Shabine in "The Schooner *Flight*." Because Walcott actively mourns the lack of mythical heroes in Caribbean culture, his poetic energy is devoted to developing "everyday characters into mythical proportions."²⁹ Yet this chapter also reveals Walcott's dark perception of mythical heroes, as ideas of aging, exhaustion, and again, a profound sense of heartache permeate his poems, interwoven with his allusions to traditional/classical heroes. This chapter further investigates the formal mythical characteristics of these characters as well as their ability to articulate his personal sense of loss and sadness through their actions.

The heroes discussed in this chapter also lend themselves to an analysis of the triumphant yet simultaneously tragic implications of paradise and utopia in Walcott's writing. This chapter argues that Walcott approaches

²⁹ Sharon Ciccarelli, "Reflections Before and After Carnival: An Interview with Derek Walcott" in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) 45.

loss in the Caribbean through the imagined construct of a non-existent Paradise. He uses the Caribbean to represent this Paradise and while capturing the sheer impossibility of this utopia to elucidate the tragedy resulting from loss. In poems such as “New World,” (1976) “Adam’s Song,” (1976) and “Sainte Lucie,” (1976) Walcott has the dual role of conveying Adam’s personal loss and translating this loss into his own. The struggle to re-imagine or re-construct Paradise becomes the poet’s ultimate (but hopeless) task, one that parallels the impossibility of regaining what has been lost.

As this journey into Walcott’s poetry begins in the poet’s psyche and memory before turning outward to questions of myth and history, Chapter Four returns to Walcott’s struggle with his own identity and responsibility as a Caribbean poet. Walcott’s inner, psychological “landscape” is reflected in his interpretation and assessment of the modern Caribbean environment. Through lucid descriptions of the landscape in poems such as “Tales of the Islands” (1962), “Origins,” “The Schooner *Flight*,” “Guyana” (1969), “Air” (1969) and “Another Life” (1973), Walcott examines both his own and the Caribbean’s fragmented identity, often discussing the latter in terms of its future. This chapter, informed by Eng and Kazanjian’s discussion of “mourning remains” argues that the landscape embodies the very remains of historical and cultural loss that Walcott has experienced, a loss he continues to mourn in what Glissant calls, “the painstaking survey of the land.”³⁰

³⁰ Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 154.

CHAPTER ONE:
“MEMORY’S SOFT-SPOKEN PATH”: ENGAGING WITH LOSS
THROUGH REPETITION AND RECOLLECTION

One of Derek Walcott’s central interlocutors has been poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Though both poets were shaped, artistically and intellectually, by a post-colonial period in Caribbean history in which the possession of a history was seen as a crucial component in the shaping of one’s cultural identity, they have chosen to interpret that mandate in very different ways.¹ A reading of Brathwaite in contrast with Walcott can serve as a useful beginning to exploring the uniqueness of Walcott’s writing in relationship to other Caribbean poets.

Brathwaite’s poetry is clearly distinguished by its idealism, plainly descriptive narrative, and emphasis on the collective. In the collection *Middle Passages*, which specifically deals with the Caribbean as a colonized land, the poems are surprisingly hopeful and almost cheerful in nature.² Braithwaite clearly believes that the Caribbean’s strong historical and cultural African “roots” contribute to a powerful sense of cultural identity for the West Indian writer. In *Roots* he writes, “African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment. Caribbean culture was therefore not ‘pure African,’ but an adaptation carried

¹ For further discussion of the significance of history to cultural identity refer to Franklin Knight’s *The Caribbean: the Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*.

² Kamau Brathwaite, *Middle Passages* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992).

out mainly in terms of African tradition.”³ In Walcott’s poetry we find, in contrast, the clear impression that the Caribbean has no true “roots” – neither in England nor in Africa. Instead, the verse carries an underlying tone of despondency:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?
(Walcott, “A Far Cry from Africa, (1962), 18)

The tone here is not necessarily pessimistic, but rather, mournful. More often than not, the final stanza or the final lines of Walcott’s poems are haunting reminders of his grief over a lost history and culture, post-colonization. The effect Walcott achieves in the lines, “How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from Africa and live?” is strikingly different from Brathwaite’s frequent use of uplifting final lines – almost to the point of exaltation:

& again there is a future in those sparks
together, comrade, friend
we say this is our land & know at last at last it is our home

now mine forever & so yours, *amigo*
ours
'w/ the vast splendour of the sunshine & the sunflower & the
stars'⁴

These final stanzas from Brathwaite’s poem “Word Making Man” convey hope and desire. In contrast, Walcott writes in “Codicil” (1970) that “To

³ Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots*, 192.

⁴ Brathwaite, “Word Making Man,” in *Middle Passages*, 7.

change your language you must change your life” and there is no hint of the “splendour of sunshine” in Walcott’s words (Walcott, 97). In these final lines of “Word Making Man,” Brathwaite allows the reader to reconcile the anger presented earlier in the poem (“but i know that we are watching in a long circle for the dawn / & that the ruling class does not wait at bus stops / & i know that we are watching in a long circle for the fire / & that our *compadores* do not ladle soup out of the yabba”) with a positive nod towards the future. We are also able to transcend the negativity initially expressed by Brathwaite and literally, “move on” to the next poems. Walcott’s haunting conclusions linger in the reader’s mind long after we have turned the page. His images, often unsettling and disturbing, are left to percolate in the confines of our own imagination.

Walcott’s quiet but plainly emotional manner has lent itself to criticism by Brathwaite, who accuses Walcott for being too “socially involved” in his verse writing and “incapable” of distancing himself from the “tensions out of which [his] poetry sings.”⁵ The emotional “distance” that Brathwaite seeks is reflected in his own use of descriptive narrative throughout *Middle Passages*. Whereas Walcott’s poetry has a true affective quality, Brathwaite’s poetry lacks the degree of depth that Walcott’s verse possesses. Brathwaite’s often over-stylized diction distracts, especially when compared to Walcott’s simple and subtle lines:

it is the kite ascending chord & croon & screamers
it is the cloud that curls to hide the eagle
it is the ripple of the stream from bamboo

⁵ Brathwaite, *Roots*, 13.

it is the ripple of the stream from blue
it is the gurgle pigeon dream the ground doves coo
it is the sun approaching midday listening its splendour

it is your voice alight with echo . with the bright of sound⁶

Brathwaite also tends to use repetition (as evinced in the above excerpt from “Flute(s)”) in a coarser and more obvious manner than Walcott. As in “Word Making Man,” these lines from “Flute(s)” contain words and phrases of hopefulness: “it is the sun approaching midday listening its splendour.” But combined with the repeated “it is,” these phrases (“the ripple of the stream from blue” or “the ground doves coo”) become hackneyed and trite, often reducing his poetry to clichés.

Not only do we find idealism in the context of Brathwaite’s verse writing, but it is also evident in his choice of titles. A title such as “Word Making Man” suggests a proactive movement on the part of the poet to invent or re-invent a language. A poem directly addressing Europe’s role in slavery and colonization is titled, “How Europe underdeveloped Africa,”⁷ which takes a distinctively sarcastic approach to imperialism with an emphasis on the word, “underdeveloped.” Walcott’s own poems with a similar agenda have titles such as, “Two Poems on the Passing of an Empire,” commenting on colonial history in a more controlled manner than Brathwaite’s overly resentful style. Walcott’s title is more understated than Brathwaite’s, yet it still possesses a powerful effect as the emphasis in his title falls on the word,

⁶ Brathwaite, “Flute(s)” in *Middle Passages*, 33.

⁷ The title of this poem shares the same title as Caribbean intellectual Walter Rodney’s book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981), a study of the relationship between capitalism and slave economies.

“passing.” The significance of “passing” leads the reader to speculate about the effects of this empire. The use of the word is similar to that found in “the passing of a storm.”

Brathwaite’s idealism is genuinely linked to the collective rather than to the individual, and in *Roots* he criticizes Walcott for mostly focusing on the latter. He writes, “We could not do without the poetry of Derek Walcott, honest and unflinching testimony as it is of our condition; but his position forces the realization upon us that individual talent is not enough.”⁸ If, according to Brathwaite, individual talent is “not enough,” then one must, as he does, rely on the voice of the collective or the “community” in one’s poetry. Brathwaite primarily uses the inclusive pronouns “ours,” “we,” and “us” while Walcott repeatedly refers to the solitary “I” and “my.” Again, Brathwaite’s concern here with the poet’s role in the engagement of the “community” returns to the idealism that is rampant within both his beliefs and his art. Walcott, however, is distinctly different from Brathwaite in the fact that he focuses primarily on the individual and issues of individual identity.

Amidst these more formal variations in style, the fundamental difference between these two celebrated Caribbean poets and thinkers is that Walcott’s poetry ultimately stems from a lamentation, and his focus on the individual provides us with a sense of the deep pain that begins in a solitary soul and radiates outwards to its environment: the land, the people, and the remainder of the affected. Brathwaite, because of his insistent denial of the

⁸ Brathwaite, *Roots*, 19.

loss of identity or cultural history, seeks to continue the African oral tradition through his poetry with a disregard for the mourning processes that are integrated by and integral to Walcott. In contrast to Walcott's lamentation, Brathwaite's voice is one of accusation – evinced in his use of titles such as “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.” This accusatory tone only further illuminates, in contrast, the affective depth of Walcott's melancholic poetry as he pulls us into the hypnotic threshold of his metaphors.

A distinguishing characteristic of Walcott's work is his unique use of repetition, which mesmerizes the reader with its subtle yet compelling effect. Particularly in *Collected Poems*, Walcott repeatedly returns to a single word, rhyme, or symbol within a poem, but almost always presents it differently the second time around. Thus, unlike his counterpart, Walcott masters the art of subtlety while simultaneously maintaining the reader's interest. In “Exile,” for example, the instances of repetition are similar to a trail of clues. These clues in turn, encourage us to return to a previous stanza and in a sense, literally “remember” how Walcott had previously used a certain word or rhyme.⁹ Stanzas three and six of “Exile” contain perhaps the most illustrative example of this kind of repetition. In stanza three, Walcott exclaims, “Never to go home again, / for this was home! The windows / leafed through history to the beat / of a school ballad.” Here, “leafed” is used as a verb whereas in stanza six, “leaf” is used as a noun: “invisibly your ink nourishes / leaf after leaf” (Walcott, 100-101).

⁹ A more poetic, formal demonstration of the idea of “constant engagement.”

“Exile” in particular uses words that *look* or *sound* alike, but are semantically different. In the first stanza, Walcott uses the word “bellowing” (“Only the funnel / bellowing, the gulls who peck”), which is then actually repeated in the fifth stanza: “the bellowing, smoky bullock” (Walcott, 100-101). But in the second-to-last stanza, we are again reminded of “bellowing” when he writes, “when the god stamps his bells / and smoke writhes its blue arms” (Walcott, 102). Likewise, “world” and “word” and the two occurrences of “bent” and “began” in the fifth stanza are eye-rhymes:

And earth began to look
as you remembered her,
herons, like seagulls flock-
ed to the salted furrow,
that bellowing, smoky bullock
churned its cane sea,
a world began to pass
through your pen’s eye,
between bent grasses and one word
for the bent rice

(Walcott, 101).

This stanza also demonstrates Walcott’s frequent use of alliteration, which greatly contributes to the feeling of repetition. The persistence of words beginning with the letter “b” for example, threads this particular stanza together and returns us to the idea of an open wound – one that inflicts constant pain and anguish. We are bombarded with “began,” “bellowing,” “bullock,” and “bent,” then further overwhelmed by internal rhymes and tricks to the eye, such as “her” followed by “herons” and “flocked” paired with “bullock.”

Even more impressive is the transition between the fourth and fifth stanzas of “Codicil”:

I cannot right old wrongs.
Waves tire of horizon and return.
Gulls screech with rusty tongues

Above the beached, rotting pirogues,
they were a venomous beaked cloud at Charlotteville
(Walcott, 97).

As in “Exile,” we are immediately drawn to the statement filled with longing, “I cannot right old wrongs.” However, the eye is trained to see patterns, and although “tongues” and “pirogues” sound nothing alike when spoken, they look quite similar because of the “-gues.” Preceding these words are “rusty” and “rotting,” both of which provide the alliteration needed to firmly cement the two lines together. Further along are “beached” and “beaked,” which also possess an internal rhyme.

These connections between words and sounds are an extension on the formal level of Walcott’s poetic lament for the open wound that is modern Caribbean life and Caribbean history. Like the “open wound” explained by Freud and Benjamin, repetition symbolizes Walcott’s constant, melancholic engagement with his loss of historical/ancestral links and thus, identity. We also gain the sense that Walcott mourns the loss of a once “green” Caribbean – that is, the state of the islands before they were touched and ultimately exploited by invading European colonizers. His use of repetition echoes Freud’s assertion that melancholy is produced from the loss of an ideal and the struggle over regaining the lost object occurs characteristically *within* the

subject. Therefore, Walcott's approach to mourning appears as an internal obsession rather than an external display of transitory grief.

Yet while reading Walcott's poetry, we arrive at the realization that it is the *permanence* of loss – not loss itself – that is problematic for Walcott. This permanence is exacerbated by the reiteration of Walcott's loss as one that is "of the ideal kind," as Freud describes.¹⁰ It is especially difficult to move forward from this particular kind of loss because there is no specific *object* to be mourned. That is, the loss of an "ideal" is more abstract and complex; tangible objects may often be replaced, but it is impossible to restore an *essence*. Therefore, repetition is a way for the poet to *preserve* certain memories or moments. Each time a word or idea is repeated, it thereby sustains its presence throughout the poem.

The mental confusion and frustration that accompanies the internal struggle of the melancholic is also conveyed in "Codicil." In many ways, several of Walcott's poems resemble conversations with himself, and they contain a sharp sense of the poet's alienation from the world, thereby heightening Walcott's solitude. Although the language found in these poems is also repetitive, it actually creates a circular effect. The swift turn of phrase mid-line results in a conclusion completely unexpected at the outset of the line. In "Codicil," Walcott writes, "this love of ocean that's self-love" and "to change your language you must change your life" (Walcott, 97). In the first line, he quickly redirects the focus of the ocean onto himself, thus completely deflecting his attention to an internal conflict. A task that appears simple ("to

¹⁰ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.

change your language”) becomes monumental: “you must change your life.” It is despair that overwhelmingly presides in these stanzas and the repeated words and ideas serve as a mirror with which the author reflects his own melancholy back onto himself.

“Exile” does not have a regular rhyme scheme, but the presence of end-rhymes is significant in the context of repetition. In particular, the second stanza employs an end-rhyme (albeit irregular) in every line, save the last:

Even her wretched weather
was poetry. Your scarred leather
suitcase held that first
indenture, to her Word,
but, among cattle docking, that rehearsed
calm meant to mark you from the herd
shook, calf-like, in her cold

(Walcott, 100).

Although the enjambed lines initially distract us from the rhymes, our eyes are drawn to the end of each line, so that the use of rhyme actually *emphasizes* the pervasive sadness expressed in this stanza. “Weather” and “leather” are coupled in a perfect rhyme and the words preceding this rhyming pair (as is the case in “Codicil”) are unquestionably melancholic in nature: “wretched” and “scarred.” Because the lines are enjambed, the end-rhymes also contribute to an imbalance to the stanza as a whole. It is almost as if each line is weighed down by these end-rhymes. The imbalance that occurs within the lines also reflects the internal tension that exists for the poet. This tension demonstrates both the dramatic and multiple effects of Walcott’s significant yet subtle use of repetition in rhyme. While his approach is clearly less obvious than Brathwaite’s, it in fact produces a more affective quality in his

poetry. Words linger in his reader's mind from the very beginning of the poem to the end.

Walcott accomplishes more than the simple reiteration of individual words. The instances of repeated images or ideas that stretch across the entirety of the poem and convey utter dejection, are also significant. The first stanza of "Exile" begins with an ambiguous "you," who "watched the herd / of migrants ring the deck / from steerage" and moves on to a greater idea of finding one's home (Walcott, 100). This notion of observation is then repeated but inverted in the final stanza of the poem, when, "the old men, threshing rice, / rheum-eyed, pause, / their brown gaze flecked with chaff, / their loss chafed by the raw / whine of the cinema-van . . ." (Walcott, 102). Here, the old men pause to "gaze" and again, Walcott does not follow this gaze completely, but instead uses the repetition to return to a profound but abstract sense of desolation, best expressed by the "whine of the cinema-van calling the countryside / to its own dark devotions, / summoning the drowned from oceans / of deep cane" (Walcott, 102).

These more formal aspects of repetition in Walcott's poetry inevitably lead us to the larger subject of memory. Given Walcott's concern with the permanence of loss, memory is a vital aspect of sustaining both the lost ideal and a constant engagement with the past. Memories of triumph and tragedy also enable one to rebuild one's history. Simultaneously, however, memories can further incite grief as reminders of what has been lost. In his Nobel Lecture of December 7, 1992, Walcott said,

Memory that yearns to join the centre, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed, like those bamboo thighs of the god. In other words, the way that the Caribbean is still looked at, illegitimate, 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.¹¹

It is the “rootlessness” and brokenness described in the above quote that Walcott wishes to replace with memories. Walcott describes these recollections as almost physical; that is, like a “limb remembering the body from which it has been severed.” Memory, then, becomes a tool for reconstructing what has been lost.

Critics who have addressed Walcott’s use of memory focus primarily on the role of amnesia and forgetting in his poetry. This thesis argues the opposite, that Walcott consistently and continuously recalls images of the past to re-live them and in essence, reconstruct his traumatic history. Paul Breslin, connecting these ideas of memory to Adam, compares the Caribbean experience to Adam’s experience in *Genesis*. As Breslin asserts, “Walcott’s New World poet feels himself to be Adam in an elemental, ahistorical world precisely because a brutal history, shaped by the Middle Passage, has struck him so hard he cannot remember what hit him.”¹² Breslin continues to argue that Walcott “advocates for the artist a deliberately sustained forgetting,” citing lines from “Laventille”: “Something inside is laid wide like a wound, / some open passage that has cleft the brain, / some deep, amnesiac blow”

¹¹ Derek Walcott, “Nobel Lecture,” [Nobelprize.org](http://nobelprize.org). October 27, 2005, 10 Mar. 2006 <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html>>

¹² Paul Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 6.

(Walcott, 88). However, the use of “amnesiac” in this passage does not necessarily suggest that the sufferer actually experiences amnesia. Rather, “amnesiac” refers to the blow, describing the extent of its intended impact – not its *effect*. Furthermore, a large majority of “Laventille” is devoted to describing in detail the horrors and effects of the Middle Passage.

Specifically, Walcott writes,

The middle passage never guessed its end.
This is the height of poverty
for the desperate and black;

climbing, we could look back
with widening memory
on the hot, corrugated-iron sea
whose horrors we all

shared

(Walcott, 86).

The idea of the middle passage “never guessing its end” is an example of Walcott’s continued dialogue with the tragic exploitation and colonization of the Caribbean. It is with a “widening memory,” one that continues to expand and absorb the “horrors,” that Walcott navigates through his grief, countering Paula Burnett’s argument that “When, therefore, Walcott addresses the trauma of slavery, he does so in contexts shaped by the longer perspective, which enables pain to be managed . . . He simply ‘absorbs’ it as one constituent of the Caribbean experience.”¹³ Contrary to Burnett’s belief, there is no relief to be found in poems such as “Laventille.” The final line of the poem says it all: “and in its swaddling cerements we’re still bound” (Walcott, 88).

¹³ Paula Burnett, Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000) 71.

Clearly, the traumatic effects of the past continue to inform and add a deeply melancholic dimension to Walcott's poetry. In addition to the painful recollection of history however, is the idea that Walcott has actually experienced *loss*. It is this loss that is the root cause of his hopelessness – a different type of sadness transcending that which is caused by the “horrors” of slavery. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Judith Butler writes, “And perhaps most difficult, the loss of loss itself: somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a special agency, one for whom a full ‘recovery’ is impossible.”¹⁴ Butler emphasizes the feature of permanence in loss, “a fractured horizon,” that “no memory can retrieve,” and Walcott also conveys this sense of brokenness in his verses. Her assertion that “a full ‘recovery’ is impossible” is demonstrated in Walcott's wish to reconstruct what is lost, rather than to recreate something new. Memory enables one to reconstruct an event in one's mind and Walcott reconstructs gaps in his own history, culture, and identity through memories of tragedy.

This process of reconstruction, with its “fractured” pieces, contains events and sentiments that are vague and distant. Walcott employs his memory to remember what he has lost, piecing together recollections in an attempt to regain control over his heartache. Several of his poems describe

¹⁴ Judith Butler, “Afterword: After Loss, What Then?” *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, Eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 467.

things being broken, reconstructed, and broken once again. For example, the narrator searches for the moment when “the mind was halved by the horizon” to recall his memory and future in the poem “Names” (Walcott, 305). It is inferred from these lines that in order to attain something, something else must be “halved,” or broken in some way. This sense of brokenness is also inherent to poems such as “Exile.” In these poems, the reoccurring allusions to damaged, wounded, or broken people, places, and things return us to the feelings of relentless grief that plague Walcott and thus permeate his writing.

Although “Exile” is focused on India rather than the Caribbean, the poem is still a prime example of how Walcott represents melancholic notions of a lost “home” in relation to memory. Almost every stanza contains an instance of damage; more specifically, they describe something that has been spoiled or marred. For example, the final line of the third stanza depicts a “soiled, icy sheet” and the seventh stanza is even more telling in its portrayal of corruption and disappointment:

the arrowing, metal
highways lead nowhere,
the tabla and the sitar amplified,
the Path unrolling like a dirty bandage,
the cinema-hoardings leer
in language half the country cannot read
(Walcott, 102).

There is something clearly unsettling in the lines, “the Path unrolling like a dirty bandage, / the cinema-hoardings leer / in language half the country cannot read.” According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, to “leer”

is defined as “to look or gaze in a lascivious or unpleasant way.”¹⁵ Here, “leer” is used to cause shame – that is, the shame or embarrassment of not belonging. “Exile” describes someone who finds his home simultaneously familiar yet completely unfamiliar, the use of words such as, “dirty” or “leer,” expressing both sentiments of sadness and shame. Grief surfaces in the lines, “the arrowing, metal / highways lead nowhere,” and “in language half the country cannot read,” suggesting a permanence that almost becomes despair. It manifests from the feeling of impossibility, or rather, the impossibility of ever belonging or truly recognizing a place as “home.”

Walcott frequently personifies memory; this is especially evident in “Exile” when he writes, “your memory kept pace with winter’s / pages, piled in drifts” in the fourth stanza and “Your memory walks by its soft-spoken / path, as flickering, broken, / Saturday jerks past like a cheap film” in the lines that conclude the poem itself (Walcott, 101-102). Through personification, Walcott provides memory with a mind of its own completely independent from its owner. It is in this sense that we could argue that memory is something Walcott struggles to grasp, but never succeeds in acquiring. In most instances, his search for memory controls him, creating frustration. The final lines of “Exile” convey a deep sense of his helplessness, especially in the words “flickering” and “broken.” Furthermore, although memory is described as “yours,” it walks its own “soft-spoken path” separate from the writer’s own trail. Therefore, much of Walcott’s melancholy appears to stem from the idea that memory is fleeting and transitory, outside of his control.

¹⁵ “Leer,” The Concise Oxford English Dictionary, www.coed.com.

In “Names,” a poem dedicated to Brathwaite and akin to Brathwaite’s own “Word-Making Man,” Walcott writes of the deep desire to preserve or discover a memory that could somehow uncover the past, a longing that is only met with disappointment:

I began with no memory,
I began with no future,
but I looked for that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment
When the mind was halved by a horizon –
for the goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter from Canton,
as a fishline sinks, the horizon
sinks in the memory

(Walcott, 305).

In these stanzas, he seeks hopefulness in a “moment” but this moment never arrives for Walcott, the goldsmith, or the stonecutter. The direction of these two stanzas also moves downwards, with the use of repeated phrases and words: “but I looked for that moment / when the mind was halved by a horizon. / I have never found that moment / When the mind was halved by a horizon –” The downward direction represents the effect of melancholy; the lines are weighed down by disappointment and hopelessness. In the lines, “as a fishline sinks, the horizon / sinks in the memory,” we feel as though we are indeed, sinking into the poem and settling into a state of lamentation.

Because each stanza contains a definite end-stop only at the conclusion of that particular stanza, the continuity of the lines also contributes to a descending motion. It is also significant that the word “memory” is the final word in the first line of the first stanza above and it is also the word

concluding the second stanza. Thus in stanzas quoted above, the downward direction begins at the search for memory and there is a definite note of finality as the “horizon / sinks in the memory.”

Whereas Brathwaite seems preoccupied with re-inventing and re-claiming language, Walcott is concerned with preserving language. The act of preserving thus counteracts the permanence of loss and becomes a tool for coping with grief. This becomes clear in the fourth stanza of “Names,” when he writes: “Their memory turned acid / but the names held; / Valencia glows / with the lanterns of oranges, / Mayaro’s / Charred candelabra of cocoa” (Walcott, 307). Again, we cannot help but notice the presence of repetition in these lines. In this case, the alliteration found in “charred candelabra of cocoa” preserves the sounds of these words. This attempt to preserve these words is again, an example of how memory becomes a tool for control. The stanza begins with a lament (“Their memory turned acid”) but the alliteration that occurs later provides a sense of comfort.

Both the presence of repetition and the recollection of memories demonstrate Walcott’s constant engagement with history and his desire to reconstruct the past. He mourns what has been lost, but uses memory to actively reconstruct and preserve. Walcott is criticized for this engagement – an inability to emotionally extract himself from the “tensions” within his poetry, as Brathwaite describes, but he explains the reason for his insistence in “Sea Canes.” Although “Sea Canes” illustrates Walcott’s desire to resurrect

deceased friends, the longing in this poem is similar to his want to restore the past:

The sea canes by the cliff flash green and silver;
they were the seraph lances of my faith,
but out of what is lost grows something stronger

that has the rational radiance of stone,
enduring moonlight, further than despair,
strong as the wind, that through dividing canes

brings those we love before us, as they were,
with faults and all, not nobler, just there
(Walcott, 332).

In those final words, “just there,” Walcott explains his desire to experience the sheer presence of what has been lost. Although a memory does not and cannot replace the original lost object or ideal, it allows the person grieving to cope with that loss by serving as a reminder. Therefore, it is the strength of memory that possesses the “rational radiance of stone, / enduring moonlight, further than despair, / strong as the wind” for Walcott.

Even though memory is used to rebuild the past in the poet’s mind, it is also used to remember experiences of trauma and tragedy. Blatant reminders of a past that one does not necessarily wish to remember are common to Walcott’s longer poems. In “The Schooner *Flight*,” Walcott employs the voice of Shabine, a seemingly simple fisherman, who also happens to embody the Caribbean’s struggle for a historical and cultural identity. Throughout the poem, Shabine is haunted by his memories yet simultaneously dependent upon them to create an identity for himself as a Caribbean man. However, grief is a large part of Shabine’s identity; memory

and melancholy are intertwined in “The Schooner *Flight*” as memory appears to be inextricably tied to history. The memories or self-created memories of experiences that Shabine may have never experienced himself, but feels responsible for, permeate this poem.

According to Paul Breslin, memory is purposefully annihilated in Walcott’s poetry – that is, he suggests that Walcott seeks to forget the past. He further argues, “In Walcott’s poems, the erased history has to be acknowledged, since it invisibly haunts the present. But in acknowledging it, the poem usually aspires to exorcise it and thus erase it in a more complete sense.”¹⁶ Yet this seems untrue for many of the poems included in *Collected Poems*, several of which Breslin cites to support his argument. Especially in “The Schooner *Flight*,” memories provide the rootless and restless Shabine with some certainty about his past. If anything, the poem suggests that memory is an integral part of Shabine’s profound sadness, as its functions are twofold: first, it serves to remind Shabine of his guilt (mostly for carrying on an affair with Maria Concepcion) but more importantly, it helps Shabine remember his cultural past. The dreams and events he experiences on his journey in “The Schooner *Flight*” are memories of the Caribbean’s past: from the extermination of the Caribs (“I ran like a Carib through Dominica, / my nose holes choked with memory of smoke;”) and the slow invasion of Spanish colonists to the gruesome images of those traveling the Middle Passage, “Next we pass slave ships. / Flags of all nations” (Walcott, 356, 353). Although his

¹⁶ Paul Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, 113.

history and the history of the land in which he lives are fragmented, he depends on memories to remind him of his own existence.

Shabine's grief encompasses both his feelings for a family that he leaves behind in the poem and his sadness of lacking a true cultural history, except for the fragmented "memories" he recalls of running away from soldiers and seeing "ghost-ships" of the Middle Passage. Even these memories are fleeting and transitory – only pain reminds Shabine that they are real. In the section titled, "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage," he describes a scene of ghastly slave-ships and says, "my memory revolve / on all sailors before me, then the sun / heat the horizon's ring and they was mist" (Walcott, 352-353). Although Shabine attempts to remember these faces and rebuild the scene in his mind, this memory too, escapes him. His opportunity to uncover a history is like his memory – disappearing just as he comes close enough to grasp it. This frustration is part of the grief in this poem and within this section, Shabine says, "Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations, / our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose, / to hear us shouting. So we stop shouting. Who knows / who his grandfather is, much less his name?" (Walcott, 353). There is a sense in these lines that Shabine has given up on finding his past, as a defeated tone is present in the lines "Who knows / who his grandfather is, much less his name?"

Walcott uses several formal poetic tools to achieve melancholic effects. Aside from incorporating repetition into themes of memory, he also propels the poem forward through a series of linked images:

I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea-fans,
dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.
I saw that powdery sand was their bones
ground white from Senegal to San Salvador
(Walcott, 349).

In this passage, Shabine recalls the dead men he sees underwater. Again, Walcott uses a repetitive scheme here to achieve several effects. Like one's memory, the words appear in an order that serves to inspire, in a way, the next. For example, the word "brain" conjures images of a gruesome cadaver, until we remember that he is discussing corals. Yet, "dead-men's-fingers" lead directly to "the dead men" in the same line. The image of "powdery sand" continues on in the next line, when he uses the phrase, "ground white." In this sense, Walcott follows the train of human thought, which constantly forms relationships between words and ideas. These connections, like the ones examined earlier in poems such as "Exile," drive the poem forward. In this particular stanza, however, it leads us to these lines:

When I thought of the woe I had brought my wife,
when I saw my worries with that other woman,
I wept under water, salt seeking salt,
for her beauty had fallen on me like a sword
cleaving me from my children, flesh of my flesh!
(Walcott, 349).

Here, Shabine's memory of his family is linked to the memory of the dead men found in the previous lines. The line, "dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men" seems parallel to the phrases, "salt seeking salt" and "flesh of my flesh!" Although it may appear as though Shabine has been confused and blinded by his state of melancholy in these lines, this connection actually demonstrates Shabine's inability to separate his own cultural identity from his

other identities – that is, his identity as a father, a husband, an adulterer, and a fisherman.

If, while reading “The Schooner *Flight*,” one wonders about the parallels between Shabine and Walcott himself, one may not be surprised to learn that this poem was begun in 1976, when Walcott’s affair with Norline Metivier eventually destroyed his second marriage.¹⁷ However, three preliminary versions of the poem appeared between 1977 and 1979.¹⁸ Breslin explains the multi-faceted aspects of “The Schooner *Flight*,” which are inextricably tied to Walcott’s personal life:

Knowing the circumstances, one can hardly help reading the poem as grounded in autobiography, preoccupied as it is with the sundering of ties to marriage and nation and with a quest for self-transformation and rebirth. The revisions show Walcott increasing the artistic distance between himself and his persona, the sailor-poet Shabine, and shifting the center of gravity from Shabine’s personal troubles toward ... his visionary struggle to free himself from the colonial past.¹⁹

The next chapter of this thesis is concerned with the final line of Breslin’s assertion that Shabine’s personal strife calls for an even deeper examination of Walcott’s “visionary struggle” with his colonial past. In Chapter Two, we place Walcott and his alter-ego, Shabine, within the context of history in order to further analyze the reason(s) for both men’s shared melancholy.

¹⁷ Ibid., 189.

¹⁸ Ibid., 189.

¹⁹ Ibid., 189-190.

CHAPTER TWO:
**“A RUMOUR WITHOUT ANY ECHO”: RECONSTRUCTING A
TRAGIC HISTORY THROUGH SPACE AND TIME**

In its historical past, the Caribbean has been divided, exploited, and disconnected from its ancestral roots – whether these roots be considered African or European, neither or both. Geographically, the region itself is divided into a series of small islands that are, as Shabine describes in “The Schooner *Flight*,” “As many islands as the stars at night / on that branched tree from which meteors are shaken” (Walcott, 361). This fragmentation is then culturally reflected in the multiple languages, races, and classes that constitute the region today. Hence it is not surprising that the search for one’s particular cultural history in a post-colonial Caribbean is characteristic of Walcott’s poetry.

As Nicholas Everett notes, “Colonial history offers merely divisive images which can only provoke nostalgic remorse, shame or rancour . . . for Walcott, then, the first step towards creating a West Indian identity is to resist the meanings conferred by history or mythology since the histories and myths in question are based elsewhere.”¹ Yet one cannot help but notice when reading Walcott’s verse that his recovering and reconstruction of the past (both personal and collective) is a large source of his poetic melancholy and lamentation. Contrary to Everett’s belief, Walcott does not resist the meanings of other histories or mythologies but rather, uses them to evince his

¹ Nicholas Everett, “Paradise Lost,” London Review of Books 11 Jul. 1991: 22.

desire for the ownership of a singular identity that, while encompassing several histories, is inclusive rather than divisive. Furthermore, the Caribbean's fragmented history does not appear to offer mere images of nostalgia, shame, or bitterness to Walcott. Instead, the historical dividing and conquering of the Caribbean (indigenous) peoples and lands, in addition to the growing collective awareness of "rootlessness" in one's own homeland seems to provoke sentiments of sadness and longing in diverse Caribbean subjects – a condition Glissant also addresses in his collection of essays, *Caribbean Discourse*.

Walcott's frequent poetic references to history parallel Glissant's assertion that "The difficulty of knowing history (one's history) provokes the deepest isolation."² Glissant further expands this statement by describing this journey for knowledge as "infectiously tragic and decisively obscure, which not only a chosen hero but a people will want to use to repossess the beginning of their time." Glissant's specific use of the words "isolation," "tragic," and "obscure," are especially apt when compared to the tone of Walcott's discussion of history. For every instance of Walcott mentioning "elation" or an "Adamic vision" in his poetry³, there are equal inclusions of suffering or tragedy. This persistent vein of melancholy threads its way through poems such as "The Schooner *Flight*," "The Sea Is History," "The Star-Apple Kingdom," and "Origins," all of which address the idea of history as a concept synonymous with suffering.

² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 82.

³ Everett, "Paradise Lost," 23.

Unlike Everett, Paula Burnett believes that Walcott approaches history with the intention of healing the wounds of the colonial past: “His writing contains a range of strategies calculated to heal the trauma, which in the event involve not so much a rejection of history as a re-conceiving of it in order to bring it under psychological control, to resist hypnosis.”⁴ She further contends that Walcott prevents himself from “dwelling on the ancestral trauma of slavery, just as pain prompts others to finger the wound,” as “forgetting can offer a real cure.”⁵ What is of particular interest is Burnett’s connecting this act of forgetting to Shabine in “The Schooner *Flight*,” even though Shabine says (when reminded of his adulterous affair with Maria Concepcion), “there’d be no forgetting. / Is like telling mourners round the graveside about resurrection, they want the dead back” (Walcott, 346). Clearly, Shabine is not only thinking of Maria Concepcion for she is not dead. Rather, the description of mourners resurrecting the dead suggests early in the poem that what plagues him are emotions far more complicated than those resulting from an affair. Through the comparison between him and mourners in these lines, Shabine explains that forgetting is impossible. However, Burnett cannot be blamed for overlooking the implications of these lines, as they are immediately cast aside in the following phrase, “so I smile to myself as the bow rope untied / and the *Flight* swing seaward” (Walcott, 347).

Ultimately, although Burnett recognizes Walcott’s tragic relationship with history she also maintains that he manages his pain within the context of

⁴ Burnett, Derek Walcott, 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

his poetry and that this pain, in her words, is neither “overwhelming” nor the focus of his work. Burnett’s interpretation of the emotional affect in Walcott’s poetry is more akin to Freud’s definition of mourning rather than melancholia. In her analysis of Walcott’s work she provides us (and him) with the ability to move forward and heal from the wounds of a tragic history. Like Everett, who writes that history is “invoked then dismissed,” Burnett believes that the tragic is not “ignored or suppressed,” but “addressed and answered,” in Walcott’s poetry, allowing the past to be redeemed.⁶ In the following analysis of “The Star-Apple Kingdom” and “The Sea is History,” we shall see instead that Walcott’s engagement with the past is constant, and his relationship to the past is never forgotten – if anything, the idea of an “open wound” remains a central and integral part of his work.

Walcott presents history as tragic in both the content and form of his poetry. It is not difficult to understand what Everett is referring to when he mentions the elation that is simultaneously and distinctly tinged with “pathos and anger.”⁷ This dichotomy is clearly revealed in the second stanza of “The Star-Apple Kingdom,” a poem that Paul Breslin describes as, “a mordantly satirical account of the disintegration of the West Indies Federation.”⁸ Walcott uses the first stanza to investigate the past while establishing an idyllic landscape, one replete with seemingly perfect images of “casuarinas plunging green manes / in time to the horses” (Walcott, 383-384). But the mood quickly changes in the second stanza when he writes, “Strange, that the

⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁷ Everett, “Paradise Lost,” 23.

⁸ Breslin, Nobody’s Nation, 217.

rancour of hatred hid in that dream / of slow rivers and lily-like parasols, in
snaps / of fine old colonial families.” Later he observes,

. . . the good Negroes down in the village,
their mouths in the locked jaw of a silent scream.
A scream which would open the doors to swing wildly
all night, that was bringing in heavier clouds,
more black smoke than cloud, frightening the cattle
in whose bulging eyes the Great House diminished;
(Walcott, 384).

The line that begins, “Strange, that the rancour . . .” evokes a sense of betrayal. Walcott’s incisive choice of words (“the rancour of hatred”) provides a sharp contrast to the picturesque descriptions of “slow rivers and lily-like parasols.” Then, the “black smoke” slowly invades the poem, preceded by “silent” screams, and we begin to view all of Walcott’s initially idyllic portrayals of nature with some suspicion. In this particular passage, the poet evokes the emotional qualities of suffering by describing the scream as one that “brings in heavier clouds” and even “frightens the cattle.”

Walcott’s densely overlapped lines further exacerbate the overwhelming sense of “pathos and anger.” “The Star-Apple Kingdom” is thickly layered with enjambed lines and the effect is one that emphasizes the anger and sadness that is present within the poem:

One morning the Caribbean was cut up
by seven prime ministers who bought the sea in bolts –
one thousand miles of aquamarine with lace trimmings,
one million yards of lime-coloured silk,
one mile of violet, leagues of cerulean satin –
who sold it at a markup to the conglomerates,
the same conglomerates who had rented the water spouts
for ninety-nine years in exchange for fifty ships,
who retailed it in turn to the ministers
with only one bank account, who then resold it

in ads for the Caribbean Economic Community,
till everyone owned a little piece of the sea
(Walcott, 390-391).

The use of enjambment in this particular verse paragraph leaves no room for pause, providing no relief for the eye or the mind as we are forced to read on (the first complete end-stop occurs at the last line of the stanza). Beyond the strong presence of cynicism this creates is an even greater impression of sorrow. Immediately after the line, “One morning the Caribbean was cut up,” Walcott proceeds to literally divide the Caribbean himself by reducing the sea to mere numbers. Using commercial goods, lace trimmings, silk, and satin, as a metaphor for the sea Walcott quietly but insistently evokes feelings of anger at the buying and selling of the Caribbean. The collection of islands is reduced to nothing more than another trendy commodity, sought after by the “seven prime ministers.” In this stanza, the Caribbean is depicted as a landmark of beauty, rendered helpless as it is divided, sold, and owned by people who are solely interested in its potential for profit. The dividing, buying, and selling described in this passage also distinctly parallels that of the Triangular Trade, a term used to describe the shape of the trade and exchange of goods between Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean between the 16th and 18th-centuries. Instead of land however, slaves from Africa were bought and sold in a similar manner. The final line of this stanza, “till everyone owned a little piece of the sea,” is filled with both disgust and sadness, as Walcott illustrates another tragic instance when a price was placed on something invaluable.

Walcott constantly returns to the sea in order to unlock stories from the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras and thus perform a poetic reconstruction of historical events. In Everett's interpretation of Walcott, "history and mythology are turned against themselves, invoked and then dismissed."⁹ While he notes the significance of the past to the development of Walcott's cultural and poetic identity, he misses this continuous and purposeful engagement with history. This commitment to the Caribbean's story of struggle is, without a doubt, far from "dismissed" in Walcott's work. In order to explain the present conditions of the modern Caribbean, he cannot avoid recounting the tragic phases of its colonial past, as he does in "The Sea Is History." This poem connects Walcott's present environment to its initial condition by situating the Caribbean's genesis in the Middle Passage, describing the creation of the New World as imagined by European colonists, and chronicling the islands' fight for independence.

The interrogative beginning, "Where are your monuments, your battles, your martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory?" immediately draws our attention to the *lack* of these things – items that typically compose a cultural history. The answer, "Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is History" introduces an element of forlornness, especially with the word "sea" repeated four times (Walcott, 364). The words "vault" and "locked" also further suggest the permanence of history's absence and the impossibility of regaining it. In several instances, the narrator searches for a sign that history is truly beginning, but his hopes are dashed by his own belief

⁹ Everett, "Paradise Lost," 23.

that even these examples of “battles” or “martyrs” are false representations. As he compares slavery to “Babylonian bondage” and describes the deaths of men and women aboard slave ships in language that is reminiscent of the Holocaust (“as the white cowries clustered like manacles / on the drowned women” and “the men with eyes heavy as anchors / who sank without tombs”), he explains that these tragedies only caused the ocean to “turn blank pages / looking for History” (Walcott, 365). These horrific events that are “locked in the sea” are the antithesis of the great monuments and triumphant battles described in the introduction to the poem. It is not a history to be ashamed of, but rather, to mourn. Walcott continues his pattern of offering examples of Caribbean history, then identifying them as only substitutes: “that was just Lamentations, / it was not History” and “but that was not History, / that was only faith” (Walcott, 366-367). The significance of this repetition lies in the understanding that the *search* for a glorious past is constant, but never fulfilled. In this way, Everett’s assertion overlooks not only the importance of historical tragedy to Walcott’s poems, but also the deeply profound quality of the poet’s commitment to those who came to the islands before him on slave-ships.

Although “The Sea Is History” is introduced by a series of questions, Walcott continues to narrate with a certain tone of authority, adding a genuinely emotional dimension. He negotiates for himself the role of a guide who, surveying the atrocities before him, wishes to answer the questions “where is your tribal memory?” and “where is your Renaissance?” in the most

affective way possible. Instead of being an observer, he writes, “I’ll guide you there myself” (Walcott, 364-365). The shift from merely answering the questions posed in the introduction to later revealing intense images of suffering demonstrates his desire to gain control over the “Sirs” who seem puzzled at the Caribbean’s lack of historical pride. These men place the narrator in a submissive position, forcing him to take the role of a child: “Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is History” (Walcott, 364). But this childishness soon disappears after the first stanza, for there is a slight trace of bitterness laced with sadness that accompanies his tour of history that is only increased by his use of Biblical terminology to illustrate the miserable state of this “New World.” For example, the “Ark of the Covenant” is a slave ship that contains “bone soldered by coral to bone” (Walcott, 364). Exodus, which chronicles the departure of Hebrew slaves from Egypt as told in the Old Testament, is the name given to these lines: “Then there were the packed cries, / the shit, the moaning: / Exodus” (Walcott, 364). The irony present in these references to biblical stories of creation and redemption reminds us that the Caribbean’s history will never be one of triumph or deliverance but instead one of anguish and struggle.

The description of the sea that follows the offer “I’ll guide you there myself” is intensified by Walcott’s employment of phonic echo and metaphor:

It’s all subtle and submarine,
through colonnades of coral,

past the gothic windows of sea-fans

to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed,
blinks, weighted by its jewels, like a bald queen;
(Walcott, 365).

In contrast to Brathwaite's more obvious rhymes, Walcott literally buries the effects of his schemes in this poem. For example, the rhyme between "subtle" and "submarine" is merely a sight or an eye-rhyme because of the silent "b" in "subtle." Nevertheless, we are naturally drawn to this pairing and inevitably to the next: "colonnades of coral." Like the majority of rhymes used in Walcott's poetry, there is more to "colonnades of coral" than mere alliteration. This grouping also contains an internal eye-rhyme, with "colonnades" sharing the "co" with "coral." The next stanza places us face-to-face with the grouper as Walcott uses "onyx" to describe its eyes, a jewel that is familiar to us. Onyx is then associated with "jewels" in the next line. As readers, we are controlled by Walcott's use of imagery, rhyme, and metaphor – so often that he becomes our guide throughout the poem. By "guiding us" then, he helps us begin to form some sort of emotional attachment to both Walcott and the content of the poem itself.

If we return to Walcott's use of phonic repetition, we see this emphasis continuing in "The Sea is History." The poem is replete with repeated words, alliterations, puns, and irregular rhymes. The repetition of words accompanied by alliteration often occurs within stanzas. However, the stanzas in this poem are composed mostly of tercets, then quatrains, making it difficult for repetition not to seem banal or irrelevant. That is, it is difficult for the poet to achieve such a strong effect in such small space. Yet Walcott does this

beautifully, with the repetition contributing to an emphasis on suffering and tragedy. For example, the second stanza reads, “First, there was the heaving oil, / heavy as chaos; / then, like a light at the end of a tunnel” (Walcott, 364). Here, the word “heaving,” shortly followed by “heavy,” literally contributes to the weight of these lines. Although the words clearly have semantic differences they are connected through rhyme. Walcott enables us almost to experience the suffocating oil, which is then contradicted with the simile, “like a light at the end of a tunnel.” Again, the alliteration in “like a light” adds to the literal lightness conveyed in that line, further contradicting the previous images of “heaving oil” and “heavy chaos.” Near the middle of the poem, Walcott does something even more intriguing by employing rim rhyme: “and the furnace before the hurricanes: / Gomorrah. Bones ground by windmills / into marl and cornmeal” (Walcott, 366). In this particular stanza we are left with the echo of “mills,” “marl,” and “meal.”

While Walcott’s poetic devices serve to emphasize the emotive qualities of the text, he also consistently maintains an element of surprise. Repetition, for example, is commonly used in the discussion of history in “The Sea Is History.” The first stanza establishes a phrase (also the title of the poem) that is continuously changed and used as a semi-refrain throughout. Within the declaration, “the sea is History,” also exists a dramatic pun on the word, “history.” One could interpret this phrase as the sea holding the answers to history, or “the sea is History” could be interpreted colloquially as, “the sea is gone.” The former meaning provides some hope in recovering

history, but the latter is completely despondent. It is clear that Walcott intended this double meaning, for the search for history spans the entirety of the poem and at one point a real feeling of hopelessness occurs as he writes, “and that was Lamentations – / that was just Lamentations, / it was not History” (Walcott, 366).

This refrain also seems to divide the poem into four parts, with the first part occurring in the first stanza. Almost every stanza in this poem is enjambed. For example, the eighth stanza is a continuation of the seventh: “but the ocean kept turning blank pages / looking for History.” This is soon followed by, “it was not History,” (stanza 16) “but that was not History,” (stanza 22), and “like a rumour without any echo / of History, really beginning,” which in a contradictory manner, concludes the poem. While these lines containing the word “history” may not constitute a traditional refrain, they are nevertheless an example of a repeated theme. Not only does this repetition disprove Everett’s assertion that history is “invoked and then dismissed” in Walcott’s poetry, but it also necessitates a further discussion of the function of the refrain as Walcott uses it in this poem.

In *The Poem’s Heartbeat: A Manual of Prosody*, Alfred Corn speculates that “the refrain contains an obsessive thought or concern, one returning over and over again to consciousness until some kind of resolution is reached and the poem ends.”¹⁰ Here Corn echoes Freud’s discussion of melancholia, as Freud also described in the following passage,

¹⁰ Alfred Corn, *The Poem’s Heartbeat: A Manual of Prosody* (Ashland: Story Line Press, 2003) 101.

It is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.¹¹

Disregarding Freud's more negative characterizations of melancholia as a "turning away from reality" and "hallucinatory wishful psychosis," he does describe a phenomenon similar to that found in Corn's description of the poetic function of a refrain: the obsessive internalization and resurrection of the lost object or ideal, "returning over and over again to consciousness." Freud uses the more specific phrase "clinging to the object," which also aptly describes the desperation Walcott expresses through the use of both repetition and refrain.

Beyond the structure of the poems themselves lies the question of how to interpret their conclusions. After following Walcott through tumultuous and tragic events expressed in thick layers of metaphor and rhyme, we are left with something that does not resemble a resolution to his heartache, yet it is not entirely hopeless either. It is this teasing sense of uplift that provokes critics such as Burnett into making the assertion, "The weight of the tragic history is real and constant, but it is matched by an opposing and equal force, that of awe and delight, resulting in a kind of equilibrium – on balance positive."¹² The final stanza of "The Sea Is History" would seem to illustrate this phenomenon:

and in the salt chuckle of rocks

¹¹ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.

¹² Burnett, Derek Walcott, 89.

with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo

of History, really beginning

(Walcott, 367).

Here, the mention of the “salt chuckle of rocks” returns a sense of ease to the poem as a whole, and the final line, “of History, really beginning,” also possesses a hopeful tone. However, it also leaves us frustrated because the statement itself is circular, bringing us back to the beginning of the poem. History, in this sense, begins at the end of the poem, yet the images here of the sea are reminiscent of the lines, “The sea / has locked them up. The sea is History.” Even if Burnett successfully argued that the weight of tragic history is contradicted by hope, it is clear that this force is in no way “opposing and equal,” nor that this force is that of “awe and delight.”

To further examine this artificial notion of anguish balanced by hope, we might turn to “The Schooner *Flight*,” which is similar to “The Sea Is History” in the way that the narrator, Shabine, engages with Caribbean history. Shabine speaks in retrospect about his journey in the final section titled, “After the Storm”:

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,
and when that don't work, I study the stars.
Sometimes is just me, and the soft-scissored foam
as the deck turn white and the moon open
a cloud like a door, and the light over me
is a road in white moonlight taking me home.
Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea.

(Walcott, 361)

This final verse paragraph may be interpreted in different ways, on one hand as inherently tragic and on the other, perhaps, as hopeful and resilient. However we cannot ignore the intuition that this poem, like many others, has no clear resolution – we are left with a rather unsettled feeling instead of the sense of relief we expect to find, as described by Everett. The first line of this passage returns us to the idea of loneliness and isolation: “My first friend was the sea. Now, is my last.” It also suggests that the narrator, Shabine, will remain restless – constantly traveling on the sea and never finding his “rest place” (Walcott, 350). According to Robert Elliot Fox, this sense of isolation is inherent to Caribbean literature: “... for it is necessary to realize that there is also a literature of exile produced by those who remain at home and yet who are, seemingly, rootless ... To know *where* you are, but not *who* you are; to struggle with the present while still not being able to fully comprehend the past – this, too, is a form of exile.”¹³ Fox’s assertion seems to encapsulate Shabine’s final sentiments in these lines. Although he is “rootless,” he still believes he is on the road bathed “in white moonlight taking me home.” Shabine does not reach his home at the end of the poem, but he is on his way. Nevertheless, the fact that he “sings” to us from the depths of the sea returns him to a site of mourning and we are left unsure what to make of this ending.

¹³ Robert Elliot Fox, “Derek Walcott: History as Dis-Ease,” *Callaloo* 27 (Spring, 1986) 334.

“Time Filled by the Presence of the Now”: Walcott’s Poetic Place-in-Time

In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin asserts, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.”¹⁴ The present being constantly informed by the moment that preceded it, one cannot navigate a way toward the future without turning back to remember the past. Thus Walcott’s constant engagement with history makes his relationship with time a significant feature of his poetry. In a manner that is reminiscent of heroic stories of Roman battles, historical events (not necessarily pertaining to Caribbean history, but rather moments experienced by the narrator) described in *Collected Poems* are often written in the “historical present,” which depicts past happenings as if they were occurring at that very moment. This provides, in accordance with Benjamin’s idea of “time filled by the presence of the now,” a certain sense of urgency that pervades the poem itself. Walcott approaches every piece in his work with a demonstrated awareness of his place-in-time – that is, his position within the poem in terms of the past, present, and future.

He clearly defines his place-in-time in “Homecoming: Anse La Raye.” After mentioning what he *had* learned in school (in reference to the past), this brings him to the moment when “spindly, sugar-headed children race / pelting up from the shallows / because your clothes, / your posture / seem like a tourist’s. / They swarm like flies / round your heart’s sore,” a

¹⁴ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261.

moment occurring in the present (Walcott, 128). In the stanza describing the children, the use of the present tense heightens the sense of tragedy found in the lines “they swarm like flies / round your heart sore;” in a sense, we experience the poet’s feelings of sadness along with him. After this encounter with the children, the final stanza evokes feelings of anger at the politicians who have encouraged the Caribbean’s dependence upon rich tourists:

Dazed by the sun
you trudge back to the village
past the white, salty esplanade
under whose palms dead
fishermen move their draughts in shade,
crossing, eating their islands,
and one, with a politician’s
ignorant, sweet smile, nods,
as if all fate
swayed in his lifted hand

(Walcott, 128-129).

Words such as “dazed” and “trudge” create the impression that time is moving slowly, but we continue to remain in the present. Finally, the languidness found in the fisherman’s “politician” smile, a smile filled with ignorance of the poverty of the islands that exists before him, further slows time. To counter these feelings of lethargy and apathy, a sense of urgency for change arises and we are left thinking about why there is nothing done for these impoverished children whose lives “pass them by” (Walcott, 128). The pressure, then, for Walcott to take action is evinced in the lines where he hoped “it would mean something to declare / today, I am your poet, / yours” (Walcott, 128). In the declaration “today, I am your poet” Walcott suggests that every moment is important when the progress of a nation rendered

helpless and impoverished after being destroyed by centuries of colonialism is at stake. In “Homecoming: Anse La Raye,” he can no longer occupy himself with a focus on the past or future, but is instead startlingly confronted by the glaring situation of the present.

In “Verandah,” Walcott encounters the ghost of his grandfather, who is “uprooted from some rainy English shire,” beyond apparitions of planters and colonels whose spirits transcend the colonial era and enter the poet’s modern world (Walcott, 89). In the following stanzas, Walcott uses the present tense to address ghosts of the past, fully negotiating a place for them in his “moment” and thus repairing missing links in his genealogy: “I ripen towards your twilight, sir, that dream . . . I climb the stair / and stretch a darkening hand to greet those friends / who share with you the last inheritance / of earth, our shrine and pardoner” (Walcott, 90). Timelessness pervades the lines of poems such as “Verandah” and is conveyed through a series of paradoxes. The poet speaks of “ripening” towards twilight; as he grows and matures while looking backward to his grandfather he also meets a man (whom he addresses respectfully as “sir,” as if he does not know him at all) who is nearing his “twilight” or end. In order to draw closer to his grandfather, Walcott must also simultaneously increase the distance between them through time. This metaphor of re-connection is then extended to the image of the poet “climbing the stair” and reaching a hand forward to the dying “friends.” Within the excitement of meeting his grandfather (“A ghost steps from you, my grandfather’s ghost!”) however, exists a great sadness for he remembers

that he is only meeting a ghost, possibly invented by him in a dream (Walcott, 89). At one point, Walcott writes,

Sire,
why do I raise you up? Because

Your house has voices, your burnt house
shrills with unguessed, lovely inheritors,
your genealogical roof tree, fallen, survives,
like seasoned timber through green, little lives
(Walcott, 90).

These lines are filled with his intention of reconstructing his genealogy. He “raises” his grandfather, as if he was restoring a house and explains that because the “genealogical roof tree,” although fallen, survives, it contains “green” or new little lives, waiting to be rebuilt. Walcott’s existence is due to one of these little lives. In “Verandah,” he returns to the site of destruction in order to reconstruct what has been lost, picking through the rubble to find promises of new beginnings.

Walcott’s fascination with the connection between the past and the future is clearly present in this poem and others, where images of the past are often immediately juxtaposed with predictions of the future. Lemuel Johnson refers to this seemingly contradictory juxtaposition as Walcott’s “memories-of-the-future.”¹⁵ Due to the jarring disconnect that this particular expression of the relationship to time produces, time often progresses in a non-linear, almost circular manner in Walcott’s poetry. This circularity then reveals an intersection between history, identity, and time, similar to that found in “Verandah.” A large part of Walcott’s melancholy, however, stems from the

¹⁵ Lemuel A. Johnson, “The Inventions of Paradise: The Caribbean and the Utopian Bent,” *Poetics Today*, 687.

great responsibility placed on him to repair the Caribbean's tragic past and thus guide it toward a more optimistic future of progress, while simultaneously reconstructing the fractured pieces of his own genealogical heritage. This task would not be so lamentable if it were not seemingly impossible.

Walcott's struggle to re-imagine and reconstruct the Caribbean places him into the role of a revolutionary poet. This is evidenced in early poems such "Prelude," the first poem in *The Collected Poems*, which he wrote at the age of eighteen. "Prelude" predicts his future as a writer and first names his struggle for a singular identity both as a Caribbean artist and man, a theme that would come to define his work throughout his career. At the onset of the poem, Walcott creates the voice of an observer: "I, with legs crossed along the daylight, watch / The variegated fists of clouds that gather over / The uncouth features of this, my prone island" (Walcott, 3). He immediately establishes his place-in-time (daylight) amidst images of unrest ("variegated fists of clouds"). Contradictory tones accompany this unrest. Although he professes ownership over the island, calling it "my prone island," he also uses the word "uncouth" to describe it, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary has the most common meaning of "strange," or "unfamiliar."¹⁶ In the third stanza, he makes a simultaneous declaration about his place in the literary world and the world of adulthood:

Time creeps over the patient who are too long patient,
So I, who have made one choice,
Discover that my boyhood has gone over.

¹⁶ "Uncouth," [Oxford English Dictionary Online](http://www.oed.com), www.oed.com.

And my life, too early of course for the profound cigarette,
The turned doorhandle, the knife turning
In the bowels of the hours, must not be made public
Until I have learnt to suffer
In accurate iambics

(Walcott, 3).

Within this introduction is the central idea of time and more specifically, the notion that Walcott can no longer wait to commit himself and his life to poetry (“Time creeps over the patient who are too long patient”). Yet time also restrains him, as he claims his work “must not be made public / Until I have learnt to suffer / In accurate iambics.” This creates a tension that only increases with the thoughts of “turning” in the second stanza. Although “turning” may suggest that Walcott has now “turned” from his boyhood to accept adult responsibilities, the idea becomes disturbing in the lines, “the knife turning / In the bowels of the hours.” This sort of “turning” may be connected to the “suffering” he must endure; that is, a suffering produced by time.

The slow, deliberateness of the beginning continues, magnified by meaningless people who are described as “living images / Of flesh that saunter through the eye” so that it seems Walcott’s suffering is extended to the very end of “Prelude.” But even more significant is the path of time in this poem. He begins with his “legs crossed along the daylight,” but concludes with a larger impression of his life thus far: “Until from all I turn to think how, / In the middle of the journey through my life, / O how I came upon you . . . (Walcott, 4).” This final stanza is somber, far from the optimistic bent given

to Walcott's work by critics such as Burnett and Everett. The line, "Until from all I turn to think how," returns us to the previous images of "turning," and again, Walcott negotiates his place-in-time through this act of turning. Burnett argues that, "Walcott, in his writing, manipulates time to make it a revolutionary signifier . . . [he] in effect translates this assertion of a chance to redeem the past, from a political sphere to that of art."¹⁷ In a sense, Burnett is correct in her assertion that Walcott (especially in this poem) uses time to invoke the sense of a revolution. However, there are several examples of instances when Walcott is at the mercy of time, rather than in control. This contributes to the dream-like states his characters (like Shabine) often find themselves in. Like the general consensus on Walcott's poetry, Burnett embraces a romanticized notion of Walcott's work, that he translates political tragedy in an effort to "redeem the past" into art. However, it is also evident that there exists a far more internal struggle for the poet than Burnett intuits.

This internal struggle is directly linked to Walcott's juxtaposition of his own particular feelings of urgency when confronted by time, and the dejection he suffers when he is unable to control time and it passes either too slowly or too quickly for him to grasp. In poems such as, "Names," Walcott is once again deliberate about establishing his place-in-time and thus, raising an awareness among his audience:

Behind us all the sky folded,
as history folds over a fishline,
and the foam foreclosed
with nothing in our hands

¹⁷ Burnett, Derek Walcott, 88.

but this stick
to trace our names on the sand
which the sea erased again, to our indifference
(Walcott, 306).

These stanzas exemplify an instance when both time and the sea collectively work against Walcott. We also see Walcott positioning himself in time, as he often does, in the first line: “Behind us all the sky folded, / as history folds over a fishline.” Then, our eye catches the word “foreclose,” which although possessing several meanings, causes us to focus upon the prefix of “fore-.” This prefix can mean either “before” or “earlier” but it may also be defined as “in front.” Therefore, at once, there is a suggestion of looking both forward and backward in time. The sea then serves to further illuminate this feeling in the final line: “which the sea erased again, to our indifference.” The sea’s erasure of names then reminds us that time is fleeting, and memories of the past are simply transitory – ready to be washed away by the ebb and flow of the hours. Although he begins “with nothing in our hands,” by “tracing our names on the sand” Walcott seeks to write himself and others into existence. But as the sea erases the names he is able to remain “indifferent,” perhaps because he is accustomed to watching his hard work disappear before him.

Yet time has a greater implication in Walcott’s poetry in its relationship to the idea of progress. Critics often connect the idea of time to Walcott’s use of Adamic imagery and his hope for new possibilities of progress in the Caribbean’s future. However, it is obvious that he also finds the idea of progress impossible. This impossibility is directly related to the

colonists' gradual and tragic extermination of the first Caribbean inhabitants, as described in "The Schooner *Flight*":

'Progress is something to ask Caribs about.
They kill them by millions, some in war,
some by forced labour dying in the mines
looking for silver, after that niggers; more
progress. Until I see definite signs
that mankind change, Vince, I ain't want to hear.
Progress is history's dirty joke

(Walcott, 357).

It should be noted that this exchange between Shabine and Vince occurs when they are hurtling forward at high speeds on the sea. Shabine describes it as a "crisp, bracing day. A high-running sea." In one aspect, Shabine is literally being physically moved forward, yet his mind is rooted in the past. However, discussion of the past only conjures up memories of sadness and fear. Burnett claims that Walcott's "sense of relativity of historical time as organizing concept relieves the traumatic pressure."¹⁸ Yet throughout poems such as "The Schooner *Flight*," such relief seems not just unlikely, but impossible. We are exceedingly overwhelmed by the multiple directions Shabine's mind takes us: his past, his future, his nation's past and future, his family, his failure both as a man and as a poet, his illicit affair, and the consequences of his actions are all thoughts he struggles with in the poem. The uniqueness of Shabine's plight however, is that the events he describes never occur in chronological order, yet he always describes the time of day. If anything, the "traumatic pressure" that Burnett identifies is only heightened by the chronological confusion in poems such as "The Schooner *Flight*." We feel

¹⁸ Burnett, Derek Walcott, 71.

the presence of a man who is trapped between the past and future, but also inevitably confronted with the present.

We are able to see both Shabine and Walcott in Benjamin's description of Klee's "Angelus Novus." Observing the angel in the painting, Benjamin writes:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise ... this storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.¹⁹

In many ways, this "Shabine" persona Walcott has created for himself *is* the angel of history. The pain of trauma is not, contrary to Burnett and other scholars' beliefs, healed in Walcott's poetry. The thought of one tragic event triggers a domino-like effect in Shabine's psyche, causing a plethora of other anxieties to assault him. Before he has time to "make whole what has been smashed," he is helplessly propelled into the future. The sense of urgency that prevails in a poem such as "The Schooner *Flight*" is intentional and the sheer frustration expressed at the inability to control time is evident even in Walcott's other poems.

So Benjamin's description of the angel of history is fitting for a poet who possesses such great sensibility, yet is consistently overwhelmed by the magnitude of his desire to repair and restore a fragmented sense of identity. His specific approach to history is one that is filled with sadness, longing, and

¹⁹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257-258.

lamentation – there is no method of forgetting that can provide relief or rest for this Shabine. Several critics have suggested that Walcott finds solace in the recreation of a New World and thus, of the Caribbean’s tragic past. But this view abandons the notion of the very melancholy that shapes Walcott’s relationship to history and time, one that pervades his poems and that he demonstrates formally through repetition. Instead, this thesis argues that Walcott actively participates in a poetics of reconstruction; rather than building something new, he struggles to replace what has been lost. The next chapters will analyze the difference between re-creation and reconstruction, leading us to the ways in which he utilizes myth and the Caribbean landscape to reflect his own struggle as a melancholic poet.

CHAPTER THREE:

“THE CLASSICS CAN CONSOLE, BUT NOT ENOUGH”:

REDEFINING MYTH AND A PARADISE LOST

Patrick Taylor, a critic of Walcott’s work, explains the importance of myth to any culture: “Myth provides a cultural order to reality and informs human activity.”¹ However, a region such as the Caribbean – fragmented by its history of colonial rule, slavery, and exploitation – cannot claim its own mythical stories or heroes, turning instead to myths that originate in Europe and embracing the Aegean rather than the Antilles. This embrace has drawn much criticism from Caribbean scholars, who prefer to look for a re-generation of myths created in the Caribbean versus such transference. As Glissant asserts in *Caribbean Discourse*:

A scurrilous publication in Martinique criticized the ‘separatist intellectuals’ of this country in 1979 for encouraging a ‘Toussaint complex,’ that is, for trying to compensate by the adoption of other people’s heroes for the absence in Martinique itself of a great popular hero. And it is true that this absence contributes to a community’s affliction with a paralyzing sense of powerlessness.²

In the final sentence of this passage, Glissant points to the “paralyzing” effect the lack of myths has on a community and specifically uses the word “affliction.” Although he describes a phenomenon that occurred when those in Martinique attempted to adopt Toussaint L’Ouverture (a Haitian figure), it is nevertheless relevant to this discussion of legends; for this “affliction” that

¹ Taylor, “Myth and Reality in Caribbean Narrative,” 292-293.

² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 67.

results from the absence of heroes in one's own hometown reminds us of Walcott's wound of melancholy, symbolic of the grief embedded in the Caribbean's tragic history. The particular suffering that Glissant describes is one that Walcott seeks to counter by constructing mythical heroes whose role is to restore a sense of power to the Caribbean people.

Although Walcott incorporates classical allusions (particularly to Odysseus) into his poetry, he also considers it his responsibility to create original mythical legends from the everyday, "common" Caribbean man. Furthermore, as demonstrated later in this chapter, he does not seek to replace the lack of heroes with those of European origin, but instead seeks to illuminate the parallels between characters such as Shabine, for example, to classic figures. In an interview with Robert Hamner he explains:

The only historical legends that one individual writer would have are ethnic legends of sorts ... but the point is that all of these have been erased from the memory or experience of the writer. So, what has not yet been created or is actually being created by its absence, by the chaos, by the necessity for it to be created – is a West Indies, a West Indian literature. Now that is being made out of the very knowledge that there is not one.³

It is the freezing sense of powerlessness Glissant mentions that Walcott seeks to eliminate through his use of myth and his creation of mythical characters, not only in epic poems such as *Omeros* but also in the works that appear in the *Collected Poems*. The lack of cultural heroes is intensified by the need for a hero who the common man can relate to and claim as his own. In his famous historical and dramatic account of the Haitian Revolution, C.L.R. James

³ Robert Hamner, "Conversation with Derek Walcott" in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) 28.

develops the principal leader of the revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, into a tragic hero of mythical proportions:

He slept but two hours every night, and for days would be satisfied with two bananas and a glass of water ... he had that reckless physical bravery that makes men follow a leader in the most forlorn causes ... no wonder he came in the end to believe in himself as the black Spartacus, foretold by Raynal as predestined to achieve the emancipation of the blacks. The labourers in their turn worshipped him as a direct servant of God.⁴

After describing Toussaint's legendary physical capabilities and innate genius, we truly feel as though we have discovered *the* Caribbean hero. But his achievements and character, although certainly admirable, are difficult for the common man who is not involved in a direct struggle for freedom to comprehend and believe. The post-colonial subject searches for what Walcott describes as a character who moves "towards the largeness of the mythical figure and still retain[s] the essential quality of manhood."⁵

Walcott has the natural ability of developing characters that simultaneously possess the humility of Shabine and the grandiose qualities of Odysseus. Although he undoubtedly creates these characters without relying on or adopting "other people's heroes," critics have argued the opposite. For example, Shabine's journey chronicled in "The Schooner *Flight*" resembles what the Oxford Dictionary of Asian Mythology describes as a "hero quest," in "which a hero—the representative of a culture—seeks some significant goal or boon for his people ... The hero quest can be said to reflect our own search

⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 250.

⁵ Ciccarelli, "Reflections Before and After Carnival," 45.

for identity in the face of internal and external denials of the call.”⁶ It is therefore puzzling that critics concerned with Walcott’s work simply view his handling of myth in ways similar to Glissant’s concept described earlier: as compensating for the lack of “local” heroes through the adoption of other people’s heroes. While keenly observing Walcott’s allusions to Classical heroes and themes they miss the actual creation of a Caribbean hero in poems such as “The Schooner *Flight*.”

Everett argues that Walcott’s use of both Classical and Homeric themes actually satisfies his “fever for heroic examples,” but that they result in “contrast rather than similarity: his Caribbean characters fall short of their heroic counterparts while, more poignantly, modern Caribbean life simply can’t be realised in images from the ancient Mediterranean.”⁷ Like other critics of Walcott’s work, Everett views this intersection between the Classical and the Caribbean as merely a comparison. However it is clearly more than a simple juxtaposition of greatness or heroic strength. Walcott’s Caribbean characters do not seek to “live up to” their “heroic counterparts,” as Everett suggests. Rather, it is the series of life-shaping experiences his characters encounter and the tragic situations they are forced to endure that illuminate them as “heroic.” While they attain mythical proportions, they live the lives of ordinary Caribbean men – in Shabine’s case, that of a fisherman.

Even the name “Shabine” is arbitrary: “a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes / that they nickname Shabine, the patois for / any red nigger”

⁶ “Hero quest,” [Oxford Reference Online Core](http://www.oxfordreference.com), www.oxfordreference.com

⁷ Everett, “Paradise Lost,” 23.

(Walcott, 346). Although we develop an intimate relationship with Shabine as the poem progresses and we are invited to explore his complex psyche, he remains slightly anonymous – as if his plight is applicable to any other “Shabine” on the island. Shabine’s external journey reflects his inner, psychological journey to resolve (or attempt to resolve) his problematic past (concerning his affair with Maria Concepcion), confused ancestral history, and lost sense of cultural identity. Most notably however, is Shabine’s distinctly humble persona, which makes him an incredibly easy character for readers to relate to. He is considered to possess a personality of mythical proportions mainly because of this deceptive quality: while on the surface Shabine is a simple fisherman who speaks in patois⁸ – upon closer inspection his innate capacity to articulate the multitude of personal crises he faces is astonishing. Walcott takes a figure such as Shabine and makes him mythological by forcing him to transcend his given situation, often through the character’s poetic capabilities.

Balakian refers to Shabine as “a kind of underwater Isaiah whose vision encompasses his people’s history” and describes his tone as “mythic.”⁹ What makes Shabine mythical however, is not simply his ability to encompass an entire history, but also his capacity for revealing the contradictions inherent to that past – an exploitative past of colonial ruin from which he seeks

⁸ Vernacular used in the Caribbean, especially in St. Lucia. In an interview with Robert Hamner, Walcott says, “I have not only a dual racial personality but a dual linguistic personality. My real language, and tonally my basic language is patois. Even though I do speak English, it may be that deep down inside me the instinct that I have is to speak in that tongue” “Conversation with Derek Walcott,” Conversations with Derek Walcott, 29.

⁹ Balakian, “The Poetry of Derek Walcott,” 171.

salvation for his people. Shabine's journey on the schooner *Flight* also takes us through visions of the Caribbean's past. Before stepping back in time, however, the introduction of the poem brings us to Shabine's present situation and into his personal life. On a grander scale, this section also provides us with a sense that Shabine is greatly disturbed by the direction in which his home in the Caribbean is going when he says,

and I look in the rearview and see a man
exactly like me, and the man was weeping
for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island.
Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!
From that dog rotting down Wrightson Road
to when I was a dog on these streets;
if loving these islands must be my load,
out of corruption my soul takes wings
(Walcott, 345-346).

We can infer from this verse paragraph that Shabine grieves not only for himself, but for the "whole fucking island." He cannot separate himself from the suffering of the Caribbean people, seeing himself in the houses and streets; he even remembers when he himself was "a dog on these streets." Shabine describes his affair with Maria Concepcion as his own contribution to the corruption of the islands. He feels almost responsible for the Caribbean's spoiled condition, as it parallels the breakup of his family. The line, "if loving these islands must be my load" makes it seem as though Shabine has been *chosen* to complete this impossible task and it is through this love that he seeks salvation for the islands when he says, "my soul takes wings." As he also says, "either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation," and if he represents the

Caribbean people, then perhaps their souls could transcend their current poverty through him (Walcott, 346).

According to Everett, the use of myth in Walcott's poetry "pushes . . . eras of Western history and literature into parenthesis."¹⁰ In fact, quite the opposite is true: the particular manner in which Walcott develops his characters brings the Caribbean forward from the periphery of historical and literary canons, illuminating the struggle for an identity forged through suffering and tragedy. It does not simply push Western influences to the margins, as Everett asserts. The existence of references to Greek heroes, for example, often offers a context to remind us that Walcott himself grew up learning about and adopting these Classical characters, while desiring to create his own, particular to the Caribbean. A poem such as "Homecoming: Anse La Raye" further illustrates this when Walcott writes:

Whatever else we learned
at school, like solemn Afro-Greeks eager for grades,
of Helen and the shades
of borrowed ancestors,
there are no rites
for those who have returned,
only, when her looms fade,
drilled into our skulls, the doom-
surge-haunted nights,
only this well-known passage
(Walcott, 127-128).

Here the term "Afro-Greeks" is used ironically, as if through the "borrowing" of ancestors, the school children would somehow also become Greek.

However, the real history and mythical adventures exist in that "well-known passage," the one that contributed to "doom-surge-haunted nights" and that

¹⁰ Everett, "Paradise Lost," 23.

replaces images of Helen with images of suffering. “This well-known passage” reminds us of the Middle Passage, the route taken by African slaves with the rise of sugar plantations in the Caribbean islands. The idea of the Middle Passage and plantation slavery is extended to the next stanza when the narrator encounters “sugar-headed children,” who “swarm like flies / round your heart’s sore” (Walcott, 127). A “heart’s sore” immediately evokes thoughts of the most awful wound – one that is still fresh and excruciatingly painful.

The lines of the next stanza read, “Suffer them to come / entering your needle’s eye, / knowing whether they live or die” and at once, we are reminded both of the present suffering in the poet’s mind as he remembers tragedies from the past and his acute sense of the suffering “to come” in the future (Walcott, 128). In “Homecoming: Anse La Raye,” the references to Greek epics introduce the Caribbean’s own epic of tragedy. Thus, these allusions highlight and heighten the irony of one who learns about the trials of some distant Greek hero, while remaining unfamiliar with that “well-known passage” and the atrocities suffered by his ancestors.

A similar sort of irony is found in “Origins,” one of Walcott’s earlier poems that laments the lack of both Caribbean history and myths to guide the poet through his journey for cultural and artistic identities. The second stanza of the poem recalls “Homecoming: Anse La Raye” in that it emphasizes the teaching of stories of *other* epic heroes and the pain one feels in attempting to

reach back and grasp a “memory” or snapshot of the past in order to re-create history:

Clouds, log of Colon,
I learnt your annals of ocean,
Of Hector, bridler of horses,
Achilles, Aeneas, Ulysses,
But “Of that fine race of people which came off the mainland
To greet Christobal as he rounded Icacos,”
Blank pages turn in the wind.

(Walcott, 11)

Although Burnett also examines this poem in her book, she interprets this stanza as implying only that it was naturally easier for Walcott (as a boy) to relate to the “mythology of ancient Greece than to that of lost Amerindians or of the obscured traditions of Africa.”¹¹ This interpretation misses the deliberate mocking found in the lines, “But ‘Of that fine race of people which came off the mainland / To greet Christobal as he rounded Icacos” and the weight of the blunt accusation, “Blank pages turn in the wind.” In this final line, the lack of stories truly constitutes a silence and an emptiness that is simply increased by the wind leafing through the blank pages. It is not enough to say that “myths, of course, have histories” when reading this stanza.¹² Instead, it is important to note that the introduction of Greek myth in this poem provides a quick glimpse into a deep irony, followed by intense bouts of sadness. Although this sadness seems to be resolved by the narrator in the first lines of a stanza, it is nevertheless countered with a hopelessness that reduces any hint of hope to nothing. This is contrary to Burnett’s belief that “Great as the project of history is, it is subsumed in the greater project of

¹¹ Burnett, Derek Walcott, 102.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102.

myth, for when history is narrated *as* myth, its tragic determinism can be subverted ... The tragic model is replaced with an optimistic one.”¹³ History may be narrated as myth in “Origins,” but the unmistakable tone of tragedy continues to pervade the poem; this tragedy cannot be avoided.

The idealism Burnett observes in “Origins” can be traced to Walcott’s reconstruction of the New World: “Lost animist, I rechristened trees: / Caduceus of Hermes: the constrictor round the mangrove. / Dorade, their golden mythological dolphin, / Leapt, flaking light, as once for Arion, / For the broken archipelago of wave-browed gods” (Walcott, 12). Although this “rechristening” provides a sense of new beginnings, we notice again the repeated insistence that these figures do not belong to him, the poet, but are rather “their golden, mythological dolphin.” The “rechristening” of trees is not a purely original act for these “new” names are frustratingly borrowed. Thus when Walcott proceeds to “rechristen trees,” he is not engaging in an act of creation but rather reconstruction. The Caribbean had been previously called into existence, but only through colonialism and in a therefore tragic manner. Walcott seeks to reconnect this “broken archipelago,” making it whole again and restoring it to its pre-colonial state. Because this process is continuously informed by the sadness of an irredeemable past of suffering, there is never a moment in “Origins” that is wholly optimistic. The desire to root oneself in a myth cannot be realized and the poet seems to regress when he imagines progress.

¹³ Ibid., 98-99.

The motif of a crab frequently appears in *Collected Poems*. In “Origins,” it is a figure that scuttles back and forth between the surf and time – never truly moving forward:

The mind, among sea-wrack, sees its mythopoeic coast,
Seeks, like the polyp, to take root in itself.
Here, in the rattle of receding shoal,
Among these shallows I seek my own name and a man.
As the crab’s claws move backwards through the surf,
Blind memory grips the putrefying flesh.
(Walcott, 14).

Here, the crab’s backwards movement contributes to the tension that exists between the hopefulness expressed towards a goal and the realization of that goal. Amongst the confusion of sea-wrack, the mind “sees its mythopoeic coast” and “seeks” to “take root in itself.” But the mind cannot grasp this coast or attain the rooted position it searches for and this struggle becomes a metaphor for Walcott’s goal of reconstructing and replacing what has been lost. In “Origins,” the lost ideal is represented by the “mythopoeic coast.” In his poetry, it is represented by the greater implications of a lost identity, history, and paradise.

Almost every other line in this poem serves to counter the line before it. For example, in the first two lines, the mind can visualize its aim: becoming grounded within itself through myth. The next line however contains the word “receding,” which inadvertently causes us to imagine a retreat. Although the word is used in reference to the retreating shoal, it nevertheless represents a drawing back motion. Then, optimism is found again in “Among these shallows I seek my own name and a man.” Finally,

the narrator may claim the identity he has struggled for. However, the “crab’s claws move backwards through the surf” and “blind memory” is too late – the flesh has rotted away. This frustrating but consistent deferral of the narrator’s wish to grasp his personal and cultural identity is another example of Walcott’s constant struggle to rebuild his and the Caribbean’s history for it seems impossible to repair pasts that are so completely filled with tragedy.

Images of despair, hopelessness, and exhaustion are integral to Walcott’s use of myth and stories. Whereas the creation of something new, as suggested by critics who believe Walcott plays an Adamic role of naming, typically yields a sense of freshness, energy, and optimism, the act of reconstruction is instead a frustrating and tiring process. Rather than working with a completely new world, the poet must collect and fit together fragmented pieces in order to restore something to its original (if not better) condition. In addition to the exhaustion that surfaces from this labor, he is also confronted with the tiredness that grief brings. In poems such as “Sea Grapes,” the poet possesses an insatiable desire for belonging; yet this yearning exhausts Walcott’s characters and adds an unmistakable dimension of disappointment to the poem. Immediately, a powerful feeling of weariness emerges in the opening:

That sail which leans on light,
tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean

for home, could be Odysseus,
home-bound on the Aegean;

(Walcott, 297).

Words and phrases such as “leans,” “tired,” and “beating up,” all contribute to the undeniable feeling of fatigue in this introduction to the poem. The beginning of “Sea Grapes” also refutes Everett’s previous assertion that “modern Caribbean life simply can’t be realised in images from the ancient Mediterranean,” for these lines establish not only parallels between Odysseus and the Caribbean hero returning home, but also, they suggest that these men “could be” each other and the Caribbean sea could also be the Aegean.¹⁴

Jahan Ramazani further discusses the similarity between Walcott’s characters and classical figures in the critical piece, “The Wound of History: Walcott’s *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Politics of Affliction.” Although Ramazani discusses *Omeros*, his observations are still relevant to a poem such as “Sea Grapes.” According to Ramazani, Walcott has not “simply encased a classical type in African skin” in *Omeros* but rather he has placed “a Greek mask on the wounded black body of negritude.”¹⁵ However, both instances that described by Ramazani involve an interchange between the African and Greek, whereas what Walcott achieves in a poem such as “Sea Grapes” is a *parallel* between characters such as Shabine and Odysseus. That is, they are not adopting “masks” of each other but rather living incredibly similar lives based on sadness and exhaustion.

“Sea Grapes” also discusses the central idea of a long (and seemingly impossible) journey home for both the Caribbean and Greek hero: “... for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore / now wriggling on his sandals to walk

¹⁴ Everett, “Paradise Lost,” 23.

¹⁵ Ramazani, “The Wound of History,” 410.

home, / since Troy sighed its last flame” (Walcott, 297). The phrase “sea-wanderer” projects an image of aimless or restless roaming on the sea while “the one on shore” seems to find a similar situation on land. Both men desire to return home, but the journey ahead is long and hopeless; this bleakness is demonstrated in the sixth stanza, where Walcott himself enters the poem: “and the blind giant’s boulder heaved the trough / from whose groundswell the great hexameters come / to the conclusions of exhausted surf” (Walcott, 297). It is the poet’s act of reconstruction, wearied, fatigued, and monumental, that, like Sisyphus’ rolling the boulder up a hill, is itself epic and of mythical proportions.

A Caribbean Paradise: Reconfiguring the So-Called “New World”

In addition to the parallels between Shabine and Odysseus, Walcott also develops the biblical figure of Adam in order to discuss the origins of the New World as imagined and constructed by European colonists. Adam is especially significant because he often represents the delicate balance between purity and corruption in the pre-colonial versus post-colonial Caribbean. In discussing this post-colonial glance backward in time, Balakian describes Walcott’s reconstruction of Genesis in optimistic terms: “...as so often happens in Walcott’s poems, the journey into the darkness of history enables him to validate his identity as a West Indian Black man so he can ... envision, once again, another version of Genesis – what becomes for him almost an

imaginative ritual allowing him to reclaim his people's strength."¹⁶ Balakian goes on to cite examples of such hopefulness from "The Star-Apple Kingdom."

Even if one overlooks the tragic portrayal of origins in "The Star-Apple Kingdom," it is still impossible to make such a comparative and sweeping generalization about Walcott's poetic handling of Genesis. Everett also describes the presence of paradise in similar terms: "If their [the poets Walcott praises] focus is a clamorous 'Adamic' man, his is the Edenic scene ... he seeks refuge in Caribbean landscapes which have never been marked by history or named by literature."¹⁷ By examining a few direct examples of "Adamic" or "Edenic" imagery in *Collected Poems*, we come to understand Adam as a character who manifests the genesis of corruption in the Caribbean rather than, as Everett would have us believe, a symbol for positive creativity.

In "New World," Adam retains the innocence he possesses before his Fall in Genesis¹⁸ but his alliance with the snake (described as a destined "good fellowship") is his crime: "So when Adam was exiled / to our New Eden, in the ark's gut, / the coiled snake coiled there for good / fellowship also; that was willed" (Walcott, 300-301). The first two stanzas address Genesis 3:17-19, but they also describe the toil of African slaves who mostly worked on

¹⁶ Balakian, "The Poetry of Derek Walcott," 353.

¹⁷ Everett, "Paradise Lost," 23.

¹⁸ Genesis 3:17-19 "And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Holy Bible, King James Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 2.

(but were not limited to) Caribbean exploitation colonies in the middle of the 17th-century and onward:

Then after Eden,
was there one surprise?
O yes, the awe of Adam
at the first bead of sweat.

Thenceforth, all flesh
had to be sown with salt,
to feel the edge of season,
fear and harvest,
joy that was difficult,
but was, at least, his own

(Walcott, 300).

It is impossible to ignore the relationship between the phrase “first bead of sweat” and the sweat of those enslaved on plantations, or not to recognize that the “flesh sown with salt” is also synonymous with the working conditions of these planter colonies. This imagery is further developed in the next stanzas when Walcott continues to describe the chain of events:

The snake? It would not rust
on its forked tree.
The snake admired labour,
it would not leave him alone.

And both would watch the leaves
silver the alder,
oaks yellowing October,
everything turning money.

(Walcott, 300).

In these stanzas, Adam and the snake have clearly formed a partnership that is dependent upon greed and profit. Walcott begins by developing the snake’s insidious motives (“the snake admired labour, / it would not leave him alone”) then adds Adam to the scene, making him the snake’s partner: “And both

would watch the leaves . . . everything turning money.” Adam, as a mythical figure, is not described in detail throughout “New World.” Rather, he *becomes* the snake and blends into the profit-obsessed scheme for conquest of the Caribbean islands, thus serving as a metaphor for European colonization. Furthermore, Walcott emphasizes the tacit notion of exploitation throughout these lines. The lines, “And both would watch the leaves / silver the alder, / oaks yellowing October, / everything turning money” are a direct result of the previous line: “The snake admired labour, / it would not leave him alone.” The natural, Edenic image of the trees gradually becomes tainted by the idea of leaves literally turning into money.

The poem appears matter-of-fact in tone, but it also uses formal (almost archaic) language to provide a twinge of derision from the narrator’s perspective. While the “O yes” and “thenceforth” expresses the sort of narration one would expect from a myth or fable, the clipped lines keep the poem simple, placing an emphasis on the subtext: “Adam had an idea. / He and the snake would share / the loss of Eden for a profit. / So both made the New World. And it looked good” (Walcott, 301). Ultimately, it is Adam’s idea to “share the loss of Eden for a profit” and we observe the damning consequences that stem from the ardent desire for money. Through the destruction of Paradise, Adam profits. “New World” becomes a poem that is tragic in its own right, one that openly addresses the *loss* of an Edenic Caribbean.

Critics are often quick to praise the “Adamic” sense in which Walcott recreates the New World, but they hardly discuss the mockery and hint of anger that surfaces when he actually addresses the character of Adam. Along with his unfavorable reputation in “New World,” Walcott also mocks Adam in “Sainte Lucie”:

A Sunday at three o'clock
when the real Adam and Eve have coupled
and lie in rechristening sweat

his sweat on her still breasts,
her sweat on his paneled torso
that hefts bananas
that has killed snakes
that has climbed out of rivers

(Walcott, 321).

Even in “Sainte Lucie,” Adam is mentioned alongside the snake that “pours itself / into a chalice of leaves” and the fact that “the sugar factory is empty” (Walcott, 321). Not only is he the object of derision, but he is also one who carries both tremendous guilt and blame for joining the snake in seeking profit in the New World.

The idea of Paradise always contains a hint of subtle bitterness in *Collected Poems* because it represents the loss of an ideal that can never be regained. It is not surprising then, that the tragedy of Caribbean history is often referred to as a “paradise lost.” By juxtaposing descriptions of Paradise with aspects of degradation and ruin in poems such as “Sainte Lucie,” Walcott introduces the notion that a great sense of immorality is pervasive throughout his Caribbean surroundings. In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James describes the mesmerizing beauty of San Domingo, which he later contrasts with the

“demoralizing” reality “inherent”¹⁹ to the soil that was transformed into an exploitative slave society in the eighteenth century:

San Domingo is an island of mountain ranges rising in places to 6,000 feet above sea level. From these flow innumerable streams coalescing into rivers which water the valleys and not inconsiderable plains lying between the hills. Its distance from the equator gives an unusual lushness and variety to the natural exuberance of the tropics ... a few feet above the cane-stalks waved the five-foot leaves of the banana-trees, near the dwelling-houses the branches of the palm, crowning a perfectly rounded and leafless column of 60 or 70 feet, gave forth, like huge feathers, a continuous soothing murmur ...²⁰

James continues his lengthy account adding that the “traveler from Europe was enchanted at his first glimpse of this paradise, in which the ordered beauty of agriculture and the prodigality of Nature competed equally for his surprise and admiration.”²¹ This is the same sort of paradise that Walcott describes in “Sainte Lucie” when he writes, “This is a rich valley, / It is fat with things. / Its roads radiate like aisles from the altar towards / those acres of bananas, towards / leaf-crowded mountains” (Walcott, 320). But these depictions of richness quickly disappear in the next stanza: “This is a cursed valley, / ask the broken mules, the swollen children, / ask the dried women, their gap-toothed men, / ask the parish priest, who, in the altarpiece, / carries a replica of the church, / ask the two who could be Eve and Adam dancing” (Walcott, 320). This latter description of the valley echoes James’s depiction of an era of corruption resulting from colonial rule. It may be inferred that the “cursed valley” contains legacies of the past that can be revealed only by

¹⁹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

the “dried women” and “their gap-toothed men,” who are old enough to have experienced and remember them. Even if we were unaware of the Caribbean’s tragic colonial history, it surfaces in these stanzas.

The remnants of history combined with modern depictions of poverty and Christian references are particularly apparent in “Laventille” and “Crusoe’s Journal.” These poems return us to the idea of a lost paradise, but whether this Eden was lost along the Middle Passage or on the sugar plantations is of less concern to Walcott than its present state. Kenneth Ramchand offers a context for “Laventille” by reminding us that it originally appeared in *The Castaway and Other Poems*,²² “whose main device is the Robinson Crusoe figure, and whose unifying experience, expressed and explored in various situations is the sense of being cast away and having to begin again.”²³ Similarly, Adam is exiled from Eden and must begin again. He must, in a sense, “learn again the self-creating peace of islands” and start “where nothing was / the language of a race” (Walcott, 94). The figures of Adam, Walcott, and the “we” introduced in “Crusoe’s Journal” must create a new Paradise as castaways. The grief that occurs from their initial loss of an “Edenic” Caribbean is parallel to the loneliness expressed in “Crusoe’s Journal”:

(Now pass
in memory, in serene parenthesis,
the cliff-deep leeward coast
of my own island filing past the noise
of stuttering canvas,
some noon-struck village, Choiseul, Canaries,

²² Derek Walcott, *The Castaway and Other Poems*, (London: Cape, 1969).

²³ Ramchand, “Readings of ‘Laventille,’” 169.

crouched crocodile canoes,
a savage settlement from Henty's novels,
Marryat or R.L.S.,
with one boy signaling at the sea's edge,
though what he cried is lost.)
So time, that makes us objects, multiplies
our natural loneliness
(Walcott, 93).

The tenderness in the lines "in serene parenthesis / the cliff-deep leeward coast / of my own island" revisits the idea of utopia but as the stanza progresses, the poem sinks into sadness.

Are these "New World," Adamic, poems truly representative of new beginnings? "Crusoe's Journal" provides evidence that the legacies of European colonialism continue to leave their deep and destructive impressions upon the Caribbean islands. Even the presence of faith in the New World, despite its intention to comfort, only further alienates. The conversion to Christianity is a result of "parroting our master's / style and voice, we make his language ours, / converted cannibals / we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ" (Walcott, 93). These lines refer to the influence of Christianity imposed upon the early indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. In this sense, the narrator does not experience a true genesis, but is forced to adopt his "master's style and voice." The New World is not a "green world, one without metaphors" but rather one that stirs up a "longing for those gulls that cloud the cays / with raw, mimetic cries, / never surrenders wholly, for it knows / it needs another's praise" (Walcott, 93-94). The gulls' cries, although real and raw, are merely *mimetic*, echoing sounds that already exist. At the conclusion of the poem, Walcott claims ownership for this imposed Christian

religion with the words, “our faith’s arrested phase,” but the uselessness of such faith is declared in the final line: “God’s loneliness moves in His smallest creatures” (Walcott, 94).

Similar sentiments of alienation, loneliness, and irony are to be found in “Laventille.” Living in Laventille is a daily reminder of the destruction of Paradise and the horrors of the Middle Passage. In this poem, life in the eighteenth century Caribbean is integrated into the region’s post-colonial state:

Below bent breadfruit trees
in the flat, coloured city, class

escalated into structures still,
merchant, middleman, magistrate, knight. To go downhill
from here was to ascend.

The middle passage never guessed its end.
This is the height of poverty
for the desperate and black;

(Walcott, 86).

The suffering of the Middle Passage continues, expressed in the poverty of the islands. A deep sense of hopelessness is found in the lines, “To go downhill / from here was to ascend” and Walcott makes us increasingly aware of the definitive class structures which not only separate the people of Laventille, but make progress impossible. Almost every line in the stanza above contains a reference to different “levels.” For example, the trees are “bent,” class “escalates” into structures,” and the “middle” of the Middle Passage contributes to a trapped feeling between class constructions. Near the middle of the poem, God and the New World become a bitter joke: “Which of us

cares to walk / even if God wished / those retching waters where our souls were fished / for this new world? Afterwards, we talk / in whispers, close to death / among these stones planted on alien earth” (Walcott, 87-88).

In poems such as “The Schooner *Flight*,” “Homecoming: Anse La Raye,” “Origins,” “New World,” “Crusoe’s Journal,” “Sea Grapes,” and “Laventille,” Walcott reveals the postcolonial subject’s struggle for survival in a paradise lost and against an environment that only seeks to keep him from moving forward toward progress. Mythical figures matter to a culture because they create a sense of pride and strength within that culture’s identity. However, some critics argue that writers in the Caribbean have found themselves borrowing heroes to fill the void left behind by a lack of a sense of their own notion of antiquity. In order to restore a lost sense of power in the postcolonial Caribbean subject, Walcott instead develops ordinary characters that possess heroic sensibilities. While this fortitude is found in someone such as Shabine, it is clearly absent from the biblical figure of Adam, who Walcott portrays as shameful in his partnership with the snake for the profit of Eden. In his descriptions of the now impoverished landscape of the Caribbean, one that no longer resembles Eden but rather a broken region destroyed by greed, the poet seems to blame Adam for his betrayal. The potential for moving on from this environment of destruction, for regaining a form of paradise from the remains of a region that has fallen into poverty, will be further explored in Walcott’s multiple uses of landscape in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR:
“HISTORY’S DIRTY JOKE”: THE POTENTIAL FOR PROGRESS IN
A POSTCOLONIAL LANDSCAPE

A common mistake in readings of Walcott’s work is to adopt a highly romanticized view of the poet’s use of landscape and the natural world. In his discussion of “Origins,” Balakian proposes that Walcott “is able to find in the cosmogonic conditions of his landscape a protean identity as a man and an epic consciousness for his culture,” as “the warm Caribbean waters become an amniotic bath.”¹ Burnett asserts that the Caribbean islands actually serve as a “therapeutic space . . . [they] can relieve the troubled soul, heal the wounded psyche. The paradox is that it is precisely in the site of a history of terror and humiliation that its cure is available.”² Yet these assertions are incorrect: they primarily address issues of hope and repair whereas the land described by Walcott is one filled with remnants of anger, pain, and trauma. These characteristics take precedence over those argued by Balakian and Burnett.

Rarely do images of Walcott’s natural environment present ideas of “healing or therapy” as mentioned by Burnett, and the Caribbean Sea certainly does not become the “amniotic bath” Balakian describes. The natural beauty of the Caribbean is undeniable; what Walcott offers, however, is a close assessment of this beauty, which reveals a darker and more complex realization that the land itself represents a key source of anguish for the poet.

¹ Balakian, “The Poetry of Derek Walcott,” 349.

² Burnett, Derek Walcott, 30.

As Kamada suggests, we must “consider the Caribbean landscape not only as a place of beauty but also as a place where the Middle Passage ended and the horrors of North American slavery began.”³

The sorrow of remembering and mourning a history of suffering is demonstrated in “Origins,” the very poem that Balakian uses to analyze Walcott’s imaginative construction of the New World. In his essay, Balakian quotes the lines, “O clear, brown tongue of the sun-warmed, sun-wooded Troumassee / of laundresses and old leaves, and winds that buried their old / songs in archives of bamboo and wild plantain” (Walcott, 13). Although these lines contain what appears to be an exalted tribute to Walcott’s natural surroundings, we must read further to capture his heartbreak: “O sea, leaving your villages of cracked mud and / tin, your / chorus of bearded corn in tragic fields, your children / like black rocks of petrified beginnings in whose potbellied / drought the hookworm boils, cherubin of glaucoma and gonorrhoea! / White cemeteries of shells beside the sea’s cracked cobalt ...” (Walcott, 13). In these lines the differences between humans and nature are blurred; the sea is personified, seen leaving its primitive “villages of cracked mud and tin” and the children are like “black rocks.” There is also a prevailing sense of mourning throughout these lines, as death is symbolized in the form of “tragic fields” and “white cemeteries of shells.” By directly addressing the sea (“O sea,”) and mentioning the “chorus of bearded corn in tragic fields,” Walcott produces a dramatic effect in “Origins” that reminds us of a Greek tragedy.

³ Kamada, “Postcolonial Romanticisms,” 210.

The poem is replete with images of death and disease, simultaneously juxtaposed against concepts of rebirth and “origins.” At one point in the poem, Walcott speaks of naming nature and thus claiming ownership over his environment: “Lost animist, I rechristened trees: / Caduceus of Hermes: the constrictor round the mangrove. / Dorade, their golden, mythological dolphin, / Leapt, flaking light, as once for Arion, / For the broken archipelago of wave-browed gods” (Walcott, 12). But even when he succeeds in “rechristening trees” and essentially, re-constructing a new world for himself to live and thrive in, something always detaches itself, severing the roots he has so painstakingly (and lovingly) attempted to establish. Walcott directly addresses this loss when he writes, “These islands have drifted from anchorage / Like gommiers loosened from Guinea, / Far from the childhood of rivers” (Walcott, 12). Burnett contends that “against the perception of tragic Caribbean loss, Walcott asserts the counterview, that the ancestral cultures are not lost but adapt and survive, learning to root themselves in a different soil, which then becomes as powerfully ‘native,’ and to name different trees.”⁴ But Burnett could not be more incorrect. For throughout the *Collected Poems* an aerial view of the Caribbean archipelago is more often than not one of islands broken, drifting, and divided. The true tragedy lies not in the poet’s inability to grasp completely a cultural identity for himself and his people but in the repeated destruction of his efforts, as they are reflected in his very surroundings. This destruction has been sown into the soil of a region wrested

⁴ Burnett, Derek Walcott, 36.

from its native people and exploited for centuries by European imperial powers.

Walcott tackles the issues of ancestral roots in the autobiographical poem, “Another Life.” Moreover, he reveals a strong sense of responsibility as an artist to articulate in words the purposeful meaning behind his surroundings. Each natural object described holds some sort of answer to Walcott’s loss of ancestral identification. He seems to have memorized the most sensual aspects of Caribbean nature, as demonstrated in the following lines:

But drunkenly, or secretly, we swore,
disciples of that astigmatic saint,
that we would never leave the island
until we had put down, in paint, in words,
as palmists learn the network of a hand,
all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines,
every neglected, self-pitying inlet
muttering in brackish dialect, the ropes of mangroves ...
(Walcott, 194).

In this stanza, Walcott abandons the Adamic naming he employs in poems such as “Origins” and instead, records what he sees in a wondrous tone. This description continues for another twenty-four lines, until he concludes with, “the breakers slow-dolphining over more breakers, / to swivel our easels down, as firm / as conquerors who had discovered home” (Walcott, 195). By “painting in words” the Caribbean scenery, Walcott not only reclaims the land that the conquerors stole, but like them, he also *rediscovers* it. He, like a “palmist” who learns the “network of a hand,” learns the network of the islands. The comparison between himself as a poet and the palm-reader also

adds a mystical dimension to the stanza. In the first two lines his actions are ritualistic, almost religious in tone, preceded by the line, “his canvas crucified against a tree” (Walcott, 194). Indeed, the union of art and nature is sacred in “Another Life.” He breathes life into his environment by personifying elements of the landscape and giving plants animal-like qualities: “the asphalt sweats its mirages and the beaks of / fledgling ginger lilies / gasped for rain” (Walcott, 194). The poet is responsible for re-constructing the meaning of this life; this kind of writing extends beyond the simple task of “rechristening trees,” as he does in “Origins,” to the more complex assignment of fully realizing his place within the history of his surroundings.

Thus, what is important is the *intention* with which Walcott approaches this assignment, and Patricia Ismond offers an especially germane explanation of this when she asserts,

What makes the difference is the expansiveness and depth of this route to self-definition – namely, the philosophical and epistemological intention contained in the dialectic of setting a newer world against the old. It directs him to what are core factors in the shaping of his consciousness ... the metaphoric naming of the elementals of his virgin landscape; and, continuous with this naming, a sense (a surviving presence) of prehistory as it interfaces and intersects with a burdened empirical history in that landscape.⁵

As Ismond contends, it is the “expansiveness and depth” of Walcott’s approach to “self-definition” that makes poems such as “Another Life” so poignant. As a poet, he reconstructs the islands in words, wishing to restore them to their original state – that is, the condition they were in before Christopher Columbus’s first visit in 1492, which began the centuries of

⁵ Ismond, Abandoning Dead Metaphors, 13.

struggle for dominance over the islands by European imperial powers. Thus, an intersection between “prehistory” (referring to the period prior to the arrival of European settlers) and the “burdened empirical history” (the suffering that resulted from the effects of that arrival) is embedded within the descriptions of landscape and nature in this poem. Yet, Ismond does not explore the tragic emergence of these histories and instead argues, “It is, in fact, from these reaches of a consciousness in vital contact with the elemental and mythic that Walcott is liberated and reoriented into the sources of a more mature and wider kinship, not only with Europe, but with all the ancestors – Africa, Asia, and Indoamerica.”⁶ It is difficult to imagine the “kinship” that Ismond describes when Walcott so often depicts his ancestral roots as severed, broken, or destroyed:

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

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

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

whatever their golden sounds resembled
(Walcott, 196).

And although Walcott does write of Asia and Indoamerica in poems such as “Exile,” his priorities seem to lie in lamenting the loss of his other Caribbean ancestors – the indigenous tribes of the islands, such as the Tainos and Caribs.

⁶ Ibid., 14.

In these lines, Walcott searches for a connection not only to Africa, but also to the “lost Arawak hieroglyphs and signs” that were “razed from slates by sponges of the rain.” A strong sense of sadness is expressed in the erasure of these ancient signs. The word “razed” is particularly powerful because according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it may be defined as “to destroy” or “to take away, or remove in a thorough manner,” but it also has the meaning of “to cut or wound slightly.”⁷ Therefore, the word also causes us to consider the pain of losing the link between the pre-colonial and modern Caribbean because this connection has been obliterated. Similarly, the image of “roots” also appears to bring the narrator hope at first, then disappointment. The “leaves of edible roots opened their pages” and offer themselves to the child in order that he may learn about an Africa that is depicted as “heart-shaped,” a shape that is usually associated with the feeling of comfort or affection. The fact that these roots are described as “edible” and their leaves as “opened” suggests their accessibility to the narrator, but as quickly as they are made available they are snatched away, as Walcott reminds us that the archipelago is “like a broken root, / divided among tribes.”

In “Another Life,” Walcott juxtaposes his lamentations of the Caribbean’s origins with musings of his own. Ismond’s phrase, “burdened empirical history,” reminds us of another burden (expressed in the landscape) that reveals itself to Walcott: that of his own familial history. The term “burden” becomes especially germane in this stanza:

⁷ “Raze,” [The Oxford English Dictionary](http://www.oed.com), www.oed.com.

But I tired of your whining, Grandfather,
in the whispers of marsh grass,
I tired of your groans, Grandfather,
in the deep ground bass of the combers,
I curse what the elm remembers,
I hoped for your sea-voices
to hiss from my hand,
for the sea to erase
those names a thin,
tortured child, kneeling, wrote
on his slate of wet sand

(Walcott, 209).

In the previous stanza, Walcott sees his “white grandfather’s face” and hears his “black grandfather’s voice.” His own history haunts him wherever he turns and the spirits of his grandfathers continue to communicate with him through nature (the “whispers of marsh grass” and “the deep ground bass of the combers”). Alliteration pairs the words “groans” and “ground” together in the third and fourth lines of this stanza, and we cannot help but think of burial. Although the word “ground” actually describes the “bass” in the line, the close proximity of the words, combined with the alliteration, causes us to think (at least momentarily) that the groans surface from both the ground and the “bass of the combers.”

Yet what is buried is also recycled into the natural world, as the elm reminds him of his deceased relatives. At the same time that he yearns for the connection between himself and his ancestors he curses it; the landscape and his surroundings provide at once the site for both his connection *and* disconnection. In the stanza above, he writes, “I hoped for your sea-voices / to hiss from my hand, / for the sea to erase / those names” and we gain the sense that while he *hopes* to hear in his grandfather’s voices inspiration and

answers to questions regarding the past, he cannot withstand the burden of knowing “those names.” Therefore, he longs for the sea to erase them and describes himself as a “tortured child,” one who suffers from his inability to detach himself from history – constantly forced to remember a traumatic past, while *wanting to* at the same time. As he writes three stanzas earlier, “He [Gregorias] had his madness, mine was our history” (Walcott, 208). History is his preoccupation; thus, he follows Freud’s model of melancholia with an anxiety that Freud also describes as “the melancholic inhibition” which may seem “puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely.”⁸ However, Walcott’s use of the natural landscape reveals his inner, psychological landscape.

In “Origins,” Walcott arrives again at Ismond’s “intersection of prehistory and burdened empirical history,” presenting the Caribbean in its pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial states. He also accomplishes here what Glissant calls the “painstaking survey of the land.”⁹ The mentions of “sun-warmed, sun-wooded Troumassee” and the “old leaves, and winds that buried their old songs in archives of bamboo and wild plantain” describe the region in its purest form. “We have learnt their alphabet of alkali and aloe, on seeds of / islands dispersed by the winds. We have washed out with salt / the sweet, faded savour of rivers, and in the honeycombs of skulls / the bees built a new song” – these lines address both language imposed by the colonialists and the stinging “salt” that drove out the previous sweetness of rivers

⁸ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245-246.

⁹ Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 154.

(Walcott, 15). Salt simultaneously reminds us of tears shed and sweat produced by slaves. Nothing is more tragic than the conclusion of this poem, where we see the narrator fail in his fumbling attempts to capture the Caribbean's origins when he realizes that the history of land will always be inextricably tied to a history of loss:

We praise those whose back on hillsides buckles on the wind
To sow the grain of Guinea in the mouths of the dead,
Who, hurling their bone-needed nets over the cave mouth,
Harvest ancestral voices from its surf,
Who, lacking knowledge of metals, primarily of gold,
Still gather the coinage of cowries, simple numismatists,
Who kneel in the open sarcophagi of cocoa
To hallow the excrement of our martyrdom and fear,
Whose sweat, touching earth, multiplies in crystals of sugar
Those who conceive the birth of white cities in a raindrop
And the annihilation of races in the prism of the dew
(Walcott, 16).

Here, Walcott documents the suffering of those African slaves brought to the Caribbean, whose “back on hillsides buckles on the wind / To sow the grain of Guinea in the mouths of the dead” and the extermination of local indigenous Indians. In these lines, we see an exchange of purity for corruption: the “coinage of cowries, simple numismatists” is rendered useless with the arrival of “metals, primarily of gold.” Settlers steadily wiped out the indigenous population of the Caribbean during the early years of Spanish settlement (specifically in Hispaniola). The Indians’ forced labor in gold mines greatly contributed to this genocide.¹⁰ Two lines later, the word “excrement” literally soils the stanza, further contributing to this idea of corruption. In the final three lines, Walcott shifts his focus from the Indians to the slaves: “Whose

¹⁰ Knight, The Caribbean, 35-36.

sweat, touching earth, multiplies in crystals of sugar / Those who conceive the birth of white cities in a raindrop / And the annihilation of races in the prism of the dew.” Although “birth” is mentioned in the conclusion of “Origins,” it is only the birth of “white cities.” “White” may refer to the color of sugar or the color of the colonizer’s skin. Walcott posits something distinctly tragic (“the annihilation of races”) in the image of “the prism of the dew,” to sharpen the contrast between the simultaneous ugliness and beauty of nature.

The corruption and exploitation of the Caribbean land and people is not limited to the colonial era. In the period between the end of World War II and the Cuban Revolution in 1953, tourism emerged “as an important economic, cultural, and political phenomenon,” according to historians Stephen J. Randall and Graeme S. Mount:

Improved transportation connections, enhanced and larger-scale tourist facilities and active promotion by the U.S. and local tourist industry, increasingly made the Caribbean basin a tourist destination . . . the majority of tourists were well-to-do, drawn to the gaming tables and nightlife of cities such as Havana or to the still unspoiled destination of smaller villages, historic sites, and tranquil beaches . . . consistent with what would become a lamentable but predictable trend, regional governments in their efforts to induce tourist expenditures were torn between giving tourists whatever they desired and attempting to put a clean, positive face on their societies.¹¹

Today the heavy commercialization of the Caribbean provides tourists with images of resorts and spas, reducing locals to exotic objects and the cultural implications of this industry described by Randall and Mount have clearly found a place in Walcott’s work. Walcott’s protest against this

¹¹ Stephen J. Randall and Graeme S. Mount, The Caribbean Basin: An International History (New York: Routledge, 1998) 85.

commercialization and objectification is central to his descriptions of landscape in *The Collected Poems* and there is an even greater emphasis placed on the concept of greed, which is identified as a product of the tourism boom.

The “unspoiled destination of tranquil beaches” provides the setting for poems such as “Tales of the Islands” which begins with an illustration of tranquil beauty: “The marl white road, the Doree rushing cool / Through gorges of green cedars, like the sound / Of infant voices from the Mission School, / Like leaves like dim seas in the mind; *ici*, Choiseul” (Walcott, 22). This image is later replaced in the poem by a man whose “greed had brought old Le Brun down . . . a dying man licensed to sell sick fruit, / Ruined by fiends with whom he’d made a bargain” (Walcott, 26). As Burnett asserts, “the sacred image of the Caribbean, becomes a concept under siege . . . the impact of the tourism industry on the cultural self-perception of Caribbean people is of particular concern because it reinscribes the colonial discourse of exoticism as part of its realpolitik of exploitation.”¹² This argument parallels Randall and Mount’s observation of the “lamentable but predictable trend” of regional governments objectifying local islanders in order to boost tourism. The language used by Randall and Mount, which specifically refers to the “lamentable,” perpetuates a sense of tragedy, one that reveals the beauty of the islands overshadowed by images of gambling, greed, and corruption – a second invasion, in a sense, of tourists. At the height of European colonization, the Caribbean region was the center of several European

¹² Burnett, Derek Walcott, 53-54.

powers' struggle for world dominance. With the fast-moving development of the tourism industry, we see a second struggle for power emerge through Walcott's portrayal of the effects of tourism on the Caribbean land and people.

The effect is one of exploitation, as is confirmed in the second stanza of "Prelude." Walcott begins by surveying the insular landscape: "I, with legs crossed along the daylight, watch / The variegated fists of clouds that gather over / The uncouth features of this, my prone island" (Walcott, 3). His view is expansive – one that includes the sky as well as the land itself. Nothing is left in the periphery of his view. However, this vision changes in the second stanza: "Meanwhile the steamers which divide horizons prove / Us lost; / Found only / In tourist booklets, behind ardent binoculars; / Found in the blue reflection of eyes / That have known cities and think us here happy" (Walcott, 3). In these lines we imagine the poet watching the sea, his gaze interrupted by the "steamers which divide horizons." We infer from the following lines that the steamers describe cruise ships that have made the Caribbean overwhelmingly popular to tourists. But because the visitors can only conceive of his "prone island" through binoculars, their view is severely limited. These tourists do not wish for an expansion of their view because they have already "known cities" and "think us [Caribbean locals] here happy." Walcott seeks to distinguish the Caribbean he knows from the islands that are regularly assaulted by visitors by contrasting descriptions of the undisturbed Caribbean wilderness with depictions of overt commercialism.

In “The Schooner *Flight*,” Shabine describes how the wealthy but corrupt inhabitants of the islands have tainted the land and in turn, “poisoned” his soul: “But they had started to poison my soul / with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl, / coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole, / so I leave it for them and their carnival – / I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road” (Walcott, 346). Here, Shabine escapes the consumerism he despises by turning to the sea. Kamada interprets this as Walcott’s search for redemption. He explains:

Shabine announces his intention to undergo a cleansing process, a kind of baptism where he might be washed clean of the very corruption he despises ... Walcott nevertheless seeks redemption and resolution and the establishment of a postcolonial identity capable of containing the multiple histories of trauma and beauty. He seeks to mourn while remaining a melancholic.¹³

Kamada would be correct in his assertion if not for one crucial detail: Shabine’s specific search for redemption in the *sea*. To suggest that Shabine actively “seeks to mourn” while unconsciously remaining a melancholic is to also overlook his awareness of the sea as a problematic space. The sea presents a predicament to Shabine because although it offers comfort from the “big house[s]” and “big cars,” its hypnotic qualities cause Walcott to turn inward into himself – reminding him of memories and thoughts that plague him and thus fueling his melancholy. It appears as though simply *watching* the sea instigates his troubled thoughts. For example, after he denounces his corrupt surroundings and leaves them for a “sea-bath,” Shabine claims, “I’m just a red nigger who love the sea, / I had a sound colonial education, / I have

¹³ Kamada, *Postcolonial Romanticisms*, 213.

Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation” (Walcott, 346). Immediately, he regrets this plan of escape, as he realizes it only makes matters worse for himself: “But Maria Concepcion was all my thought / watching the sea heaving up and down / as the port side of dories, schooners, and yachts / was painted afresh by the strokes of the sun / signing her name with every reflection” (Walcott, 346). However, he makes no effort to distract himself. Instead, he does the opposite as he unravels a string of lamentations while constantly relating his problems back to the sea and recording them through his poetry.

Shabine does not “seek to mourn” as Kamada argues because he knows it is impossible to “get over” his sadness. This is evident in the following lines: “I knew when dark-haired evening put on / her bright silk at sunset, and, folding the sea, / sidled under the sheet with her starry laugh, / that there'd be no rest, there'd be no forgetting” (Walcott, 346). Although Shabine's relationship with Maria Concepcion may not be interpreted as directly related to the development of his “postcolonial identity,” it is nevertheless an echo of his invariable return to a preoccupation with history. At one point, he says, “I loved them, my children, my wife, my home; / I loved them as poets love the poetry / that kills them, as drowned sailors the sea” (Walcott, 347). This declaration reveals an irony that is also present in Walcott's constant engagement with the past; although it causes him great pain, he cannot help but love his family, just as he desperately wishes to heal the open wound caused by history yet cannot help picking at it.

In the previously discussed poems, Walcott completes Glissant's "painstaking survey of the land" and confronts the traumatizing history embedded within as well as the trauma that is then reflected upon him. But we must also consider what remains, aside from painful reminders of the past and the corruption inherent to certain parts of the modern Caribbean. Stephen Breslow argues that the future of the Caribbean is simultaneously optimistic and hopeless:

Still, after such momentous revisions have been made, what remains? Certainly not the stuff of patriotic slogans, national anthems, and glorious "official" histories. The Caribbean, as Walcott is so painfully and acutely aware, will forever remain quixotic among the world's annals. As a region, it may form the paradigm for postcolonial "antihistory," for the overturning of long-cherished myths and the brutal new chronicling of oppression, racism, and genocide.¹⁴

Here Breslow echoes Shabine's sentiments in "The Schooner *Flight*" when he responds to his friend Vince's declaration of progress by saying, "'Progress is something to ask Caribs about. / They kill them by millions, some in war, / some by forced labour dying in the mines / looking for silver, after that niggers; more / progress. Until I see definite signs / that mankind change, Vince, I ain't want to hear. Progress is history's dirty joke'" (Walcott, 356).

In this poem and others in *The Collected Poems*, the potential for the Caribbean's future seems always limited by its past. Here, Shabine cannot even envision progress because he adamantly believes in the cliché that "history repeats itself." Yet at the conclusion of the poem, he speaks of the "flight to a target whose aim we'll never know, / vain search for one island

¹⁴ Stephen Breslow, "Derek Walcott: 1992 Nobel Laureate in Literature," in World Literature Today, no. 2 (Spring, 1993) 267.

that heals with its harbour” (Walcott, 361). Although Shabine uses the phrases, “we’ll never know” and “vain search,” he still presents the possibility of healing the past. He will never “get over” the tragedies of his and his culture’s histories, nor does it seem as though he wants to (Kamada argues differently) because he repeatedly and correctly predicts his disappointment. Instead, he actively tries to “forget what happiness was, / and when that don’t work, I study the stars” (Walcott, 361). The tension that results from the contraposition of idealism with rushing hopelessness undoubtedly exists in this poem. The idealism is fueled by thoughts of proactive change in the Caribbean; the hopelessness is instigated by memories of a traumatic and seemingly irredeemable past.

Not all is lost, however. In his survey of the land, Walcott sees its potential for change. But this potential is limited by the lack of people *wanting* and seeking to enact change, as Shabine says (“Until I see definite signs / that mankind change, Vince, I ain’t want to hear”). In their application of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Eng and Kazanjian note that the philosopher “proffers a continuous double take on loss – one version moves and creates, the other slackens and lingers ... mourning need not be given over in every instance to the regressive fate of a historicism bent on permanence and fixity, sustained by and endorsing an empathy with history’s victorious hegemonies.”¹⁵ By consistently returning to a history that represents an open wound and bitterly reviewing the corruption of a modern Caribbean society, Walcott provides room for possibility – but only under the

¹⁵ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 2.

stipulation that change must be made. Yet, this engagement is an example of Eng and Kazanjian's description of a loss that "moves and creates." Although the sadness pervading his verse seems permanent, his writing also seeks to illuminate possibilities for the Caribbean's future. And although this future seems bleak and is represented as such in his poetry, he continues to offer a glimpse of what the Caribbean *could be*, if "mankind change," as Shabine says. In this way, Walcott invests his melancholy into a creative process and defines his role as a revolutionary artist.

The future of the Caribbean is largely explored through landscape. While critics such as Ismond examine the use of landscape as a representation of possibility in the islands, they miss Walcott's conditional attitude towards progress, as expressed in poems such as "Guyana." Although Walcott's work is certainly redemptive in nature, it is not vengeful, as some critics have in fact suggested. By recounting the Caribbean region's past and its equally tragic postcolonial state, he seeks to improve its current conditions while placing an emphasis on hopelessness in his poems. This unpromising outlook continuously reminds us of Shabine's assertion that "mankind" must change in order for real progress to be made.

Kamada argues that Shabine's threat to those who continue to "exploit the economic vulnerabilities of the postcolonial state ... suggests a certain belief in the efficacy of poetry, but also ... that a poetic evocation of the landscape itself will be part and parcel of the technology of his retribution."¹⁶ While in other poems Walcott does not seem to align himself with Shabine's

¹⁶ Kamada, Postcolonial Romanticisms, 210.

romantic notion of revenge tactics, he does use the “poetic evocation of landscape” as a “call to arms” for those (such as himself) committed to change. In “Guyana,” he writes, “if nothing comes, / if no one ever escapes, / if the shoreline longs sadly for spires, / there is nothing left for us / but to make these coarse lilies lotuses, / for filth to contemplate its own reflection” (Walcott, 119). In these lines, Walcott does not call for the creation of a New World, but rather the active reconstruction of history, beginning now.

This rebuilding is a part of Walcott’s revolutionary poetics. It is no longer enough to wait for “something to come” or for others “to escape” – the shoreline must not long sadly for spires, but build its own, while maintaining that sadness. He argues that we cannot continue to make “coarse lilies lotuses” because it is impossible. Although “filth” in the Caribbean, manifested through the avenues of poverty and exploitation, seems certain to remain and “contemplate its own reflection,” Walcott argues for a proactive fight against apathy. Contemplation evokes thoughts of idleness, if not laziness, and he wants no part in this passive wait for change. In poems such as “Guyana,” the author suggests that the Caribbean people are satisfied with waiting for change and thus essentially allowing “filth” to continue to admire itself. Progress, according to Shabine, can simply exist as “history’s dirty joke” but this declaration is as complacent as idly “longing for spires.” Walcott recognizes the necessity of a progress that is certainly informed by a tragic history, but nevertheless one that exists. This progress is envisioned

through his poetic reconstruction of the Caribbean landscape and the reparation of its postcolonial remains.

The same plea for reconstruction that exists in “Guyana” is echoed in “Air,” which describes a natural rainforest in the Caribbean as the site of genocide and human suffering. The final stanza is of particular interest in its discussion of progress:

but only the rusting cries
of a rainbird, like a hoarse
warrior summoning his race
from vaporous air
between this mountain ridge
and the vague sea
where the lost exodus
of corials sunk without trace –

there is too much nothing here
(Walcott, 114).

Excluding the final line (“there is too much nothing here”), this stanza employs images that are unattainable, fleeting, or completely lost. The “rusting cries of a rainbird” suggests that only the memory of this bird remains. The “hoarse warrior summoning his race from vaporous air” leaves one with the chilling evocation of a ghost. Finally, Walcott writes about a history that has been completely wiped out, or “sunk without trace.” The conclusion, then, that “there is too much nothing here” seems utterly despondent. However, the declaration also provokes another kind, which is, “What needs to be done?” This returns us to the notion of remains and Eng and Kazanjian’s argument that “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are

produced, read, and sustained.”¹⁷ Through his poetic investigation of, literally, “what remains” in the Caribbean, Walcott incites such questions as “What needs to be done?” and reveals the potential of a postcolonial Caribbean from a melancholic standpoint. In this fashion, it becomes possible for melancholic subjects such as Walcott’s characters, and perhaps Walcott himself, to envision progress in the Caribbean while nonetheless retaining a somber outlook.

¹⁷ Eng and Kazanjian, Loss, 2.

CONCLUSION:
ANOTHER DIMENSION

When I began this project, I was surprised that many of my peers and other avid readers of poetry had never heard of Derek Walcott. Even more astonishing was the quality of criticism that had been produced on Walcott's work thus far. At the start of my research, I noticed a trend in the existing scholarship that consisted of mostly sweeping generalizations, rigid categorization of his themes, and not much that resembled more than mere praise for his poetry. I think what initially drew me to Walcott was not only the haunting melody of his lines, shaped by his particular use of meter and rhyme, but also the tone of sheer devastation captured in his verse. His poetry is truly gripping in the sense that it is as heartbreaking as it is astounding.

Yet the overwhelming majority of critics I have read consistently overlook the heartbreaking aspect of Walcott's work – that is, the very melancholia that shapes his relationship to history, time, place, and identity in the Caribbean as a postcolonial subject. Moreover, they often miss the connection between the formal aspects of his poems and their context and subject matter. Indeed, while there are scholars who directly address the presence of tragedy in his work, even they argue that the grief is merely transitory and that his poetic intention is to heal emotional wounds. It was important to me, then, to recognize that these critics' belief in the fleeting quality of Walcott's sadness follows Freud's model of mourning, as

distinguished from his discussion of melancholia. That is, critics such as Burnett and Everett believe that Walcott confronts his sorrow, mourns what he has lost, and recovers in time. But it was the sense of *lingering* sadness that I wished to investigate, something I was certain thrived in the lines of Walcott's verse.

Besides the presence of melancholy, Walcott's frequent and particular use of repetition also struck me as an important characteristic of his work, distinguishing him from other Caribbean poets such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite. I was therefore surprised that not a single piece of criticism I had read either addressed or mentioned this feature, which illuminates, in particular, Walcott's discussion of the Caribbean's tragic history. This repetition epitomizes Walcott's constant engagement with the past, demonstrating the metaphor of the "open wound" that Freud describes in his essay on "Mourning and Melancholia."¹ The trauma of the Caribbean's past also results in the notion of a lost ideal; that is, the loss of an archipelago that once resembled Paradise before the invasion of European settlers and the ultimate fragmentation of a cultural and personal identity amongst the peoples of the region. Therefore, Walcott uses memory as both a tool to cope with and control his severe pangs of grief as well as a mechanism for reconstructing the Caribbean to its original state.

It is therefore impossible to overlook history as a central feature of *Collected Poems*. The implications of the Caribbean's history of colonialism and exploitation constantly inform Walcott's writing, even if not explicitly

¹ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.

mentioned. But as evinced in Chapter Two, many critics argue that the trauma of slavery, for example, is never kept in the forefront of a poem for long and that the anguish expressed by Walcott is equally countered by a feelings of hope and determination. It may be true that Walcott does not allow memories of the Middle Passage and the old Caribbean plantocracy to paralyze or debilitate him, yet in making such assertions these critics make no room in their interpretations for poems such as “The Sea is History” or “Laventille,” poems that deal directly with the trauma of historical events without any hint of relief. Walcott’s melancholic relationship to the Caribbean’s past makes the concept of time a significant part of his work. In poems such as “Homecoming: Anse La Raye” and “Verandah” the present is always informed by the moment that precedes it. This creates a sense that Walcott is consistently aware of his place-in-time, that is, where he stands in terms of the past, present, and future. The panic that rises in his lines results from the feeling that he is at once trapped among these three phases, unable to turn toward one without also confronting the other.

Too much criticism on Walcott has been devoted to his borrowing and adaptation of the European poetic tradition and heroic figures. Instead, I argue that in creating his own mythological figures, Walcott focuses his attention on restoring a sense of Caribbean cultural identity by developing characters such as Shabine from “The Schooner *Flight*” into heroic proportions. As a simple fisherman, Shabine embodies the everyday Caribbean man who grapples with the difficult issues facing postcolonial

subjects. He highlights the impoverished condition of the modern postcolonial Caribbean while expressing disbelief in the region's potential for progress. Although some scholarship suggests that Shabine is a character that embodies hope (particularly near the conclusion of the poem), he remains a tragic hero.

An overwhelming majority of critics view Walcott as attempting to heal the traumatic wounds of history. Examples of this healing can be found in criticism that deals with his recreation of a New World. These critics assert that in his use of the trope of Paradise and biblical imagery, Walcott rejects the New World constructed by European settlers in the late 15th-century, one that signifies the trauma resulting from a legacy of slavery, in favor of a "green world, one without metaphors" as he describes in "Crusoe's Journal" (Walcott, 93). Walcott, then, is viewed as an Adamic figure who renames the objects that fill his surroundings. Yet even these "new names" are borrowed from other cultures, expelling the idea of an authentic re-creation. What remains consistent, however, is Walcott's continuous desire to repair and reconstruct what he has lost.

This active reconstruction is evident in his survey of the Caribbean landscape and its postcolonial remains. While critics have taken a much more romanticized view of Walcott's poetic depictions of his surroundings, I argue that his initially idyllic renderings of the landscape in poems such as "Another Life" and "Tales of the Islands" only serve to later reveal a darker assessment of issues of corruption and exploitation. Walcott constantly returns to the

Caribbean landscape in order to portray it as a site of destruction and illustrates it, as Kamada declares, “a place of beauty but also a place where the Middle Passage ended and the horrors of North American slavery began.”² However critics such as Burnett, who asserts that Walcott negotiates a “therapeutic space”³ for himself within these islands, miss the numerous occasions in which he mournfully refers to the Caribbean as broken or drifting due to the result of centuries of colonialism. The consequences of this fracturing are devastating, reflected in the poet’s own feelings of heartache. The development of the modern Caribbean also contributes to Walcott’s relentless and melancholic engagement with the landscape. Particularly prevalent in *Collected Poems* is his attack on the tourism industry and the exploitative use of the Caribbean to attract cruise ships and gamblers: “Hotel, hotel, hotel, hotel, hotel and a club: The Bitter End,” he writes in “Another Life” (Walcott, 292). However it is never truly a “bitter end” for Walcott in his poems; although not entirely uplifting, the poems that specifically deal with landscape do inspire a need for restoration in the Caribbean and a great desire to rid the islands of the poverty and corruption destroying the lives within them.

The roots of this thesis took hold when I began reading Walcott for pleasure. Although I continue to appreciate his poetry for the manner in which its beauty touches me, I strongly believe that much more work remains to be accomplished in the field of academic criticism. Yet this thesis is in no

² Kamada, “Postcolonial Romanticisms,” 210.

³ Burnett, *Derek Walcott*, 30.

way an attempt to replace or dislodge the existing scholarship on Walcott. Rather, I simply wish to add to what I believe is the fairly one-dimensional approach that has been taken by critics so far. In the end, what remains is *this* critic's powerful sense of Walcott as truly speaking to his reader and the staggering magnificence of lines like these:

Sometimes is just me, and the soft-scissored foam
as the deck turn white and the moon open
a cloud like a door, and the light over me
is a road in white moonlight taking me home.
Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea.

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