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From Malediction to Benediction: Acceptance of Self and Healing of History in Derek Walcott's *Another Life*

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ABSTRACT

The West Indies is largely a migrant society of African, Indian and European origin. This boxing-in of people of different racial backgrounds has engendered hybrids and multiple complexes among the Caribbeans. This condition, complicated by the claustrophobic littleness of the islands and the economic and political insignificance of the whole region, combined to generate centrifugal forces that drive many of the educated and business elite to flee the islands and migrate to Europe and America. Derek Walcott, a mulatto and foremost poet of the Caribbeans, has all the reasons to follow the migration trend, but decided to stay back to find a solution to his tensions of hybrids, and formulate a theory of history which will nullify the linear history that he finds inapplicable to the Caribbean situation. Walcott loves his native island of St. Lucia. He views all the hurts of Caribbean history, including his divided condition with compassion which apportions neither condemnation nor exoneration to the hurts of history. In his *Another Life*, the poet evokes his childhood experiences through which he celebrates the enchanting beauty of St. Lucian landscape. The thrust of this study is to highlight Walcott's positive conception of the Caribbean landscape and people and re-formulation, re-orientation and myth of history in contradiction of the conventional linear theory which he is convinced, can only create a crippled hate-and-revenge literature of the Caribbeans.

INTRODUCTION

Self Acceptance as Healing of History

Born of mixed heritage and educated within the British colonial system, Walcott was confronted quite early in his life with problems of hybrids and cultural schizophrenia. Walcott's divided childhood as a middle class Methodist intellectual living in a poor and predominantly Catholic community experiencing the fracturing influences of a colonial history, offers a background for his autobiographical poem, *Another Life* (1973). In his poem, Walcott describes being taught "English Literature as my natural heritage," with the effect that the "snow and the daffodils" of Wordsworth become 'more real than the heat and the oleander" of West Indies. There is a sense throughout his work that colonial education alienated him from the common life of Caribbeans.

St. Lucia Walcott's native island, was in his words, "a colonial backwater" (Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, 5), a tiny island of 238sq miles, one of the Windward Islands of the Caribbean archipelago. The island's littleness, its isolation from metropolitan centres, its underdeveloped condition, its poverty and inevitable parochialism, have been keenly felt by Walcott and have been recurrent themes in his work. But if they have caused him frustration and despair, they have also served as a challenge to him to seek amelioration in one way or another.

The topography of St Lucia also contributed to Walcott's feeling for the place and to his artistic development. He knew the St. Lucia countryside early, partly through visits to his grandfather's property near Choiseul, and partly because a close friend of the family used to invite the Walcott boys down to spend vacations on the eastern coast of the island, between Micoud and D'Ennery. It was here that Walcott experienced the epiphany which confirmed his destiny as a poet and sealed the bond of his love for St Lucia:

Whether you wanted to accept them or not, the earth emanated influences which you could either put them down as folk superstition or, as a poet, could accept as possible truth … there is a mystery, there is that is with me from childhood, that surrounds the whole feeling of the island. (Meanings, 46)

Thus, the mystical landscape was not only a feeding ground for Walcott's imagination, but also a mystery that binds him to the land. Walcott's essay, "What the Twilight Says: An Overture", according to Edward Baugh, reveals an image of himself and the actors of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop climbing to the top of the Moon, a hill and

erstwhile military fortress which overlooks the town of Castries and which has been a commanding height of St. Lucian landscape and history.

On reaching the crest look down on the tin-roofed, toy town of their leader's childhood: their gaze focuses on the house where he grew up, then sweeps outwards to take in the countryside and further still, the wild, white-lined Atlantic coast with an Africa that was no longer home. To Walcott, this looking back into his past was like a dream. As Baugh (1978) observes:

> It was as if … he was repaying the island an ancestral debit. It was as if they had arrived at a view of their own bodies walking up the crest their bodies tilting slightly forward, a few survivors. It was not a vision but a memory … (*Derek Walcott*, 2)

Here we are led into the dominating concern of Walcott in his works: history as memory that is subject to amnesia and landscape that envisions compassion. Kenneth Ramchand (1993) sees landscape as "a stabilising force and a continuous presence in Walcott's works". He adds that " we cannot read very far in Walcott's early poems without meeting descriptions of landscape and an attempt to relate and compare human concerns to its varying aspects" (115).

In a biographical note on Walcott, John Figueroa makes an important observation that Walcott's concerns moved from those of cursing the vile things of his early experience to that of blessing the good things. According to him, few people could have moved as (Walcott) did, from his early feelings of rejection to his wonderful taking over, in *Another Life* (1973) of Francois Villon's "I have swallowed all my hates" (83). In "Derek Walcott: A Personal Memoir", Figueroa writes:

> One of his remarkable achievements … has undoubtedly been his movement from exorcism to benedictions. He had much to reject in the time and place of his birth, but he has been able to move from the necessary rejection … to the acceptance of, and the building on, all that was positive: his great gifts, his family nurture, the good colonial education which he received, the care of such people as Harry Simmons and the Irish brother who introduced him to Joyce and Yeats and Irish ballads (83).

The cultural factor which first would have made any gifted person as Walcott uncomfortable, dissatisfied and rebellious, and which he was later, with the touch of a true alchemist, to transmute to gold, are alluded to by Shabine, the main character in, and narrator of Walcott's "The Schooner Flight" when he comments:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea, I had a sound colonial education, I have Dutch, nigger and English in me. And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation (*The Star-Apple Kingdom*, 4) Walcott's task is to evolve a schema, a way, some theory or perception through which to reconcile his divided, mongrelised self in order to escape being torn apart and traumatised by the tensions of history that made him both black and white, and neither. In his struggle to heal his divided self and that of the Caribbean society, Walcott adopts the therapeutic option of perceiving the hurts of Caribbean history with compassion, not with anger, or apportioning blame, not with flight.

Walcott's mother was his connection with the Dutch, his father was from Warwickshire in England. Two of his grandparents were black; two white. This is expressive of the racial/cultural mixture of his island home. St. Lucia itself had been battled for by the French and English for centuries. According to Figueroa (1992), "fourteen times it changed hands between England and France". ("Derek Walcott – A Personal Memoir," 84)

So while the population was genetically African, with a fair sprinkling of the Caribbean and European, the cultures which were brewing together were Trans-Atlantic African, French (Pre and Post Revolutionary), British (mainly through schooling and the English language it taught), heavily Roman Catholic, with a small but staunch Methodist presence. By the time Walcott was growing up, English was the language of education and civil service, French Creole the language of the street and the countryside. As Figueroa observes:

> One of the marks of Walcott's greatness is that while many of us would have done our best to deny the 'mixture' generated in our culture through history and European geopolitics, and a few of us would have merely accepted it, Walcott used it and the experience that it brought, to make poetry of the highest quality. ("Derek Walcott – A Personal Memoir". 84)

Walcott was brought up as a strict Methodist in a country of at least 90% Roman Catholic. His mother was a devout Methodist, his father an Anglican, his teachers at St. Mary's Roman Catholic laymen and Irish Religious (Reverend Brothers). The Irish Brothers were mostly rebels and rather anti-British; one of these introduced Walcott to Joyce's *Ulysses* when that book was still banned in the United Kingdom. Beyond this observation is the fact that Walcott's outlook springs from the composite synthesis that dictates his personality which evolves the compassion that permeates his work.

Walcott's *Epitaph for the Young* (1949) and *25 Poems* (1949) were published at the end of the 1940s (1949) when Caribbean poetry was entering a new phase of development. It had reached where, in Seymour's words, "the land in which the people live and move and have their being, begins to assert its presence and to supply the dynamic necessary for developing the new voice" (qtd. in Sander, [1976], 60).

From the point of view of this vision, Walcott holds that the truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains not forgives history. This insight accords with the thrust of this research. Walcott's rejection of history as a creative or culpable force points to his principle of creative reinvention and the grand understanding he practices as compassion. Walcott (1978) finds in poets such as Neruda, Cesaire and Pierse an" are of the numinous", the "elemental privilege of naming the new world which annihilates history… they reject the ethnic ancestry for faith in the elemental man". (*The Muse of History* 40).

His "The Muse of History" is a powerful essay that elucidates his view on the essence and relevance of Caribbean history in the creative process and growth of the Caribbean writer. Here Walcott articulates his rejection of the use of linear history as a creative force, settles for the amnesia of history and expounds the myth of the *Adamic* essence of the Caribbean man. This mystic creation, for Walcott, becomes a positive vision of the Caribbean, a touch stone for the reconciliation of all the contradictions and dilemmas in himself and the Caribbean society.

Walcott's Nobel-winning speech of 7th December 1992 clearly defines its vision of the Caribbean society. His speech examines his view of history by first castigating what has be a jaundiced view of history which has been the legacy of the Archipelago. "The way that Caribbean is still look at, as illegitimate, rootless, mongrelised. "No people there" to quote Froude, "in the true sense of the word? No people. Ferments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken"

("The Anthill" 1 of 3).

This he sees as the "Sigh of history" which to him is the province of writers unable to come to terms with the landscape. To him and this is very essential to his vision of the society, the sigh of history dissolves as one considers the beauty of the landscape. "Visual surprise is natural in the Caribbean, it comes with the landscape and faced with its beauty, he sigh of history dissolves. The sigh of history rises over ruins. ("The Anthills" 1 of 3).

Walcott (2005) emphasized the essence of Caribbean art with regard to history. Antillean art is the restoration of the shattered histories of the region:

Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took it symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the ceiling of its original scope. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments… this gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles ("The Anthills" 2 of 3).

This "gathering of broken pieces" places on the Caribbean the desire for creolisation, which Walcott (2005) also emphasises:

Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own accreting and secreting fragments of an old, and epic vocabulary from Asia and Africa… The original language dissolves from the exhaustion of distance like log trying to cross an Ocean, but this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors is the process that the poet faces every morning of his working day ("The Anthill"3 of 3).

Walcott thus stresses cultural syncretism and the uniqueness of the Caribbean. This shows the need for possibilities in the Caribbean, for survival, not despair is the essence of Walcott's vision. "This is the visible poetry of the Antilles, survival", hence he proclaims, for every poet it is always morning in the world. History is a forgotten, insomniac night; History and elemental awe are always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of history" ("The Anthill" 3 of 3). It is out of this ardent love for the Caribbean world or its kaleidoscope landscape that Walcott's vision of compassion and reconciliation emerges. And it is to this alluring vision that this study turns in this exploration of *Another Life*.

Walcott's *Another Life* is largely informed by his childhood experiences. In this work, Walcott's past, home, school. Hybridity and the tiny island of St. Lucia, form the thrust of his imaginative quest. *Another Life* is an autobiographical poetry; in it Walcott confronts his childhood experiences that inform his creative career.

The poem begins with the young Walcott trying to capture in a sketch a Virgie landscape of sunset. Virgie stands for the beauty of St. Lucia. According to Baugh, there was no better place for the poem to begin [for] Walcott perceives St. Lucia as the most beautiful island on earth, Virgie is a crystallisation of all his feelings for St. Lucia. As the remembered glow of sunset transfigures the landscape, so the poet's art transfigures the remembered life (*Another Life,* 20).

It mesmerised life fire without wind,
and as its amber climbed
the bear stained ovals of the British fort
above the promontory, the sky
grew drunk with light.
There, was your heaven! The clear
Gaze of another life,
A landscape locked in amber, the rare
Gleam. The dream
Of reason has produced its monster:
A prodigy of the wrong age and colour ("Another Life" 3)

His poetic eye focused not inwards towards himself but outwards towards the immense, ageless, organic Caribbean sea:
Verandas, where the pages of the sea
Are a book left open by an absent master
In the middle of another life-
I begin here again,
Begin until this ocean's
A shut book … ("Another Life" 3)

Walcott sees the sea as complex: a ceaseless, natural agent of change, a dark impenetrable mirror, a fruitful natural lover; an open inviting blank texture. Walcott is here evoking a metaphor for his own poetic consciousness and vision encompassing his home island and the entire Caribbean island just as the sea itself.

In *Another Life*, (1973) Walcott casts his journey as a poet beyond a simple reversal of history or reordering of his heritage. In these opening lines, Walcott's poetic vision is a quest not simply to articulate a lamentation of his own anachronistic and displaced self, but to erase that sense of wrongness with waves lapping against the infinitely shifting shores of the self. As the waves crash on the beach, he views from the promontory of his "verandah" the sea daily washing away the

memory of yesterday's coastlines, yesterday's imprints on the beaches, continually changing the shape of his island; the poetic lines ebb and flow against the dynamic boundaries of his identity. In other words, Walcott seeks to compose on the surface of the page a new beginning, howbeit inevitably dynamic, for the Caribbean Sea has taught him that all beginnings are illusionary. As the crashing waves continually alter the shoreline, Walcott turns this simultaneously destructive and creative natural force into a symbol of the essence of his poetic vision.
In considering the effect of the natural environment on the Caribbean consciousness, Walcott states:

> To me there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean-in the surf which continually wipes the sand clean, in the fact that those huge clouds change so quickly. There is a continual sense of motion in the Caribbean caused by the sea and the feeling that one is almost travelling through water and not stationary. ("Critical Perspective on Derek Walcott" 65-66).

This Caribbean consciousness then forms the basis for a poetic consciousness that engenders *Another Life*, (1973) which in essence is a poetic underscoring of his childhood formative years which in turn is the basis, a search for a new life.

In an earlier work, Walcott sees himself "poisoned by the blood of both" (African and European); now he proclaims himself as a "prodigy of the wrong age and colour" and a "monster" produced by the "dream of reason". In this work, *Another Life*, Walcott sees neither the history nor the landscape of his Caribbean as the "monster" but as a context for understanding and accepting his identity, and a "blank page" into which he will write "another life". He accepts his historical position as a place to begin, a "verandah" from which to view his life and his world anew.

Book one entitled "The Divided Child" begins with the young Walcott trying to capture in a sketch the Virgie landscape at summer, one of the many natural beauties of St. Lucia, his island. One of the glories of St. Lucia landscape is the Virgie sunset, and according to Baugh, the Virgie peninsula was more than an adjunct to the natural history of the island; for Derek Walcott it was a microcosm. According to Baugh (1993),

Virgie meant for Walcott the beauty of St. Lucia; it meant the coconut walk which his father had planted, it meant history and romance; it meant his beloved Andre villes who lived there at the

water's edge; it meant Simmons and his studio; it meant privilege and aspiration. ("Derek Walcott" 19)

And so it was appropriate for Walcott, in trying to examine his formative years as a poet, to begin with scene of beauty that crystallises all his feeling for St. Lucia. Apart from revealing the beauty of the Virgie peninsula, the glowing sunset presents the extremes of privilege and poverty. The glow reveals the beach, the government house, and the Santė Antoine Hotel (all symbols of privilege and affluence), as well as the shacks of the poor representing the other face of St. Lucia. Thus, at the beginning of *Another Life* with "a stroke of the brush" or should we say pen, Walcott portrays the duality of Castries (St. Lucia) which will dominate the entire work. What Baugh calls "the double-ness of vision" ("Another Life" 21) that sense of paradox which he tries to reconcile in his poetic career-idealisation and harsh actuality. This is personalised when he referred to himself as "a prodigy of the wrong age and colour".

This cultural duality imposed on him by history finds expression in his work right from the beginning of his career as a poet. First in those famous lines: "I who, empoisoned by the blood of both/ Divided to the vein" ("In A Green Night" 19), yet Walcott's task as a poet is to synthesise this duality by examining the various strands of this historical imposition. He came into the world as a twin, he is a Methodist in a predominantly Catholic society; a brown middle class in a predominantly poor black peasantry and a lover of the English tongue in a predominantly French-patois speaking St. Lucia. These strands are woven together in *Another Life*, a poem that takes on an epic stature.

Appropriately, in *Another Life*, Walcott moves from a celebration of the natural beauty to the celebration of his mother. Although the memory of his father, who died when he was about a year old, lingers in the family home, his mother dominates the second chapter of *Another Life*. The chapter celebrates his mother's strength of character as she labours to bring up her children in rectitude, marking her as a model "of that capacity to endure which the poet searches for throughout the poem" ("Derek Walcott" 25). Also, her quiet "uncomplaining fidelity to her dear husband" ("Derek Walcott" 25) stands poised against all the betrayals which Walcott will chronicle in the poem. However, in celebrating his mother's values which include a sense of order, the dignity of work, sense of reverence for experience and religion, Walcott brings into the chapter the duality of life and ageing. The first half of the chapter presents his mother's vigorous and

youthful life, the second half leaps forward in time to the house and mother in age and decay:

Old house, old woman, old room,
Old planes, old buckling membranes of womb,
Translucent walls,
Breathe through your timbers; gasp
Arthritic, curling beams,
Cough in old air …
Skin wrinkles like paint
The forearm of a balustrade freckles, …
From the short eyes of windows
And the door, mouth clamped, reveals nothing,
For there is no secret,
There is no secret
But pain so alive that
To touch every room, pain shining in every
Womb, while the blind, dumb
Termites with jaws of the crab cells consume,
In silent thunder … ("Another Life" 13-14)

The imagery of bodily diseases (arthritis, fever, cancer) works powerfully with the imagery of natural ageing to embody, according to Baugh, "a sense of mortality and the inevitable erosion of time" ("Derek Walcott" 26).

Thus, by acknowledging and accepting the fact of death and decay, Walcott stresses the need to affirm life to the last gasp. But *Another Life* is a work motivated by a reverence for life, motivated by a dedication to a place as portrayed by an experience which Walcott relates:

About the August of my fourteenth year
I lost my self somewhere above a valley …
Riffling smoke climbed from small labourers' house,
And I dissolved into a trance.
I was seized by a pity more profound
Than my young body could bear, or climbed
With the labouring breakers of bright cloud,
Then uncontrollably I began to weep,
Inwardly, without tears …
I felt compelled to kneel,
I wept for nothing and for everything. ("Another Life" 42-43)

Walcott's kneeling, according to Baugh "is a gesture that concentrates his reverence for life ("Derek Walcott" 34). It is a moment of dedication to the land and the people, a moment of dedication essentially to life. It is a compassionate stance that motivates the entire poem and invariably his entire career as a poet. Now the poet is set according to Baugh to create a New World of art, by taking possession … of the inheritance which was (his) country, by returning it to itself in the image of his art, by "making" it afresh through the magical act of 'naming' it in all its parts, thereby immortalising it. ("Derek Walcott" 39)

"We were blessed with a virginal, unpainted world with Adam's task of giving things their names …" ("Another Life" 152). Thus, Walcott makes bare an aspect of his seeing the Caribbean man as being "*Adamic*" – an idea which had been struggling for expression as far back as "Roots" *In a Green Night* (1962) and which began to flower in the Crusoe poems especially "Crusoe's island" and "Crusoe's Journal". This idea also affects his concept of history. As a growing schoolboy, history was "the glamour of British imperial expansion, and war presented as heroism" ("In a Green Night" 43). It is a history that divided the world between inferior natures. But as he grows, he sees this history for what it is. History conceived as chivalry was only "the fiction/of rusted soldiers fallen on a schoolboy's page … a history of ennui; defence, disease … ("Another Life" 70). Thus, Walcott is divided between history as it is lived in the mind of his headmaster, and another, lost history, that of the "nation", as symbolised in the island's landscape:

I saw history through the sea-washed eyes
Of our choleric, ginger-haired headmaster,
Beak like an inflamed hawk's
A lonely Englishman who loved parades
Sailing and Conrad's prose ("Another Life" 70)

But Walcott sees the heroic in the ordinary people. He sees history in the myth of the people and is desirous to "make out of these foresters and fishermen/ heraldic men" ("Another Life" 75). To do this requires a proper understanding of history

Where else to row, but backwards?
Beyond origins, to the Whale's wash,
To the epicanthic Arawaks's Hewanora,
Back to the impeachable pastoral,

Praying the salt scales would flake from our eyes ("Another Life" 75)

To conceive of their story as history as observed by Baugh "was to challenge the conventional concept of history, to advance a concept of history as endurance and the capacity to survive, however unspectacular" (Derek Walcott" 46). This concept which he began in *The Castaway and Other Poems*, (1965) especially the poems he later develops in "The Sea is History" spans his entire poetic career. This however, will come to an epic proportion in *Omeros* (1990) by his celebration of the ordinary Caribbean people. Thus in *Another Life*, Walcott presents his confrontation of his personal history and the history of his society and also develops a concept by which his societal history should be examined. This is evident from his essay "The Muse of History" which is contemporaneous with *Another Life*. In his essay, Walcott rejects the worship of limited concept of history which enables the Caribbean to fall into the trap of the shame-and-revenge syndrome. To Walcott, placing too much emphasis on history as a searching out of cause and results, leads consequently to the apportioning of guilt and blame. History's concern for pinpointing cause and effect is part of its general "worship of fact" and historical time. This worship, involves a vision of man as a creature chained to his past rather than an "elemental" being inhabited by his present. Hence, Walcott admires and values those New World writers who according to Baugh (1978)

Reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them, history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory. The philosophy based on a concept of history time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the old. ("Derek Walcott" 75)

This concept frees the poet form the chain or tyranny of the past, to see life in the present and celebrate that life.

I accept this archipelago of the Americas. [Walcott affirms] I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who brought me I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you black ghost, when you both whisper "history" for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates … ("Another Life" 77).

Thus Walcott's rejection of the conventional concept of history frees him to create a New World myth and live above the Caribbean history*lessness* enacted by the British historian, J.A Froude. *Another Life* begins with a personal history and ends with the history of the

society. This accomplishment paves the way for Walcott to bring forth the epic of his society – a feat he accomplishes in *Omeros* (1990).

CONCLUSION

This essay has examined Derek Walcott's *Another Life*, a work of poetry informed by the poet's childhood experiences and existential problems as a mulatto of African and European ancestry. The research also explored Walcott's rejection of the recurrent impulse among the Caribbean educated and professional elite to migrate to Europe. Walcott favours staying back in his St. Lucia Island to cherish into the beauties of its landscape and people, and forge a positive and acceptable vision of Caribbean history as it will impact Caribbean literature positively. The study examined Walcott's rejection of linear history for its inevitable exhumation of interminable wounds and hurts and apportioning of blames and exonerations. Walcott neither blames nor exonerates history. He looks at the hurts of history with compassion and advocates a historical amnesia which might enable the Caribbean person, like Adam, to name and control his world. The essay analyses Walcott's rejection of linear history as harmful to the development of Caribbean literature, arguing that linear history can engender a hate-and-revenge literature which can stultify the development of Caribbean literature. The essay concludes that *Another Life* is outstanding among works of Caribbean poetry which paint the Caribbean people and landscape in a positive light.

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