Tributes to Derek Walcott, 1930-2017

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In Various Light

Edited by

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To Caribbean makers past, present and to come

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Other arts

Visual surprise is natural in the Caribbean, it comes with the landscape, and faced with its beauty, the sigh of History dissolves. —Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 68.

Not vassals but princes

It is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes. —Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 51.

Legacy

In advancing the claims of a predecessor (and rotating them so that they catch a new light) the poet is advancing his own claims, his own poetry, and even poetry. —Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 32.

Memorabilia

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you?
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems, and new!

But you were living before that,
And you are living after,
And the memory I started at—
My starting moves your laughter!

I crossed a moor, with a name of its own
And a certain use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about:

For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather—
Well, I forget the rest.

— Robert Browning, from *Men and Women* (1855)

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

HELEN GOETHALS

Seeds on the Black Sill

These cloud-sopped, marble hands, this monumental
Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm
Storm me forever over her grave until
The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love
And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.
—from Dylan Thomas, "After the Funeral" in *The Map of Love* (1939)

We like to think that Derek Walcott would not have disapproved of this anthology, for he was known to praise the work of anthologies and, although sometimes caustic in his comments about what he considered to be ill-conceived work, he was remarkably generous in his acknowledgement of the many artists and writers he did admire. Indeed, it could be said that Walcott considered his entire life-work to be a form of tribute, the inheritance of what he saw as a debt owed to the father that he had barely known: "My calling as a poet is votive, sacred, outdated if you will, but it was a cherished vow taken in my young dead father's name, and my life is to honour that vow." (Baer, 1996, 85). All of his poetry collections and an extraordinary number of poems were dedicated to a person or to a small group of people whom (to use his own favourite term) he especially cherished: his mother, his brother and sister, his wives, his son and daughters, his friends. These dedications are not only tributes *to* the help each dedicatee had given him, directly and indirectly, but they make each publication as it appears an offering, a gift *for* someone close to him.

Walcott's lifelong practice of the tribute and the multiple forms this took would make an interesting study in itself. Taken chronologically, the many personal and (more rarely) topical dedications chart the steady, and sometimes complicated, course of Walcott's affections. The *placing* of the tribute, within or without the poem, is in itself significant, affecting the force of the other voice so included in the poetic conversation. A tribute may be found in a title ("Jean Rhys") or, more frequently, in an epigraph ("The

Saddhu of Couva", for Kenneth Ramchand) or as a direct address within the poem ("Turn to us, Ovid").[1] Sometimes a rather one-sided dialogue is set up, as with Christopher Okigbo in "Negatives" (Walcott, 1986, 124). At other times a complex conversation takes place, as in "From This Far", with its epigraph to Robert Giroux, its direct address to George Seferis, and the many allusions to classical Greek art. (Walcott, 1986, 414-417). An even grander example is Walcott's "Eulogy to W.H. Auden", a magnificent and multi-layered tribute to an older poet by a younger one.[2] Truly, what Walcott said of Lowell was also true of himself: "He had the honesty to know his greatness, to make the great his colleagues." (Walcott, 1998, 98).

Not all tributes are explicit, of course. Some of Walcott's finest are mimetic, as in the wonderful opening of "The Schooner Flight": "In idle August, while the sea soft …" (Walcott, 1986, 345). Such tributes are not the less gracious for their relying on the reader to recognize the source. The implicit tribute is a form of allusion and, as Christopher Ricks observed, "The allusion is a bonus, not an entrance-fee." (Ricks, 2002, 165). Tributes can also be structural, as in the loosely *terza rima* form of *Omeros* or they can be metaphorical, a tendency to which Walcott was prone and which he never ceased to deplore:

> Why not see Helen
>
> as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
> swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,
> as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door? (Walcott, 1990, 271)

It was that very ability to see plainly, unrelationally, as Yeats in his poem longed to love Anne Gregory, that Walcott envied in Robert Lowell:

> He saw the light on the brick opposite his apartment in New York not as the radiance in Shelley, or the marble light of Yeats, or the ineffable light of

[1] Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986) 427, 372, 442 respectively. All further references to Walcott's work will be in brackets, and can be found in the "Works Cited" at the end of this article.

[2] The poem was commissioned by Joseph Brodsky for Auden's memorial service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York on October 17, 1983. It was published in *The Arkansas Testament*, but omitted in the 1986 *Collected Poems,* perhaps for the reasons evoked in the discussion of the occasion in Baer, 1997, 194-206. There is a perceptive article available online, by Nina Martyris, "Mourning Tongues: How Auden was Modified in the Guts of the Living", first published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books,* January 28, 2014.

> Wordsworth, but as light in New York, on modern brick. (Walcott, 1998, 91-92)

What we admire in other people is often the very quality we would like to admire in ourselves, so that in this tribute to Lowell's vision we also have one of the many reasons why Walcott never abandoned painting. Painters work in a medium which is not intrinsically metaphorical, unlike words which, being rooted in a shared store of memory and agreed meaning, always point to something other than, beyond, themselves.

Readers of Harold Bloom might well see tributes as so many explicit expressions of an "anxiety of influence". Walcott, perhaps protesting too much, once angrily denied the validity of this critical view (Baer, 1996, 186). His experience of the practical apprenticeship that is required by painting, and his respect for his father's copying skills, helped to free him from the fear of mimicry which dogged other colonial and postcolonial writers. He could not, however, entirely erase the colonial associations inherent in the term 'tribute': something paid by the weak to the strong, a kind of tax paid to Caesar. Rather, he seems to have shared Edward Saïd's view that the influence of the powerful, be it poetic or political, was not necessarily anxiety-inducing but could also, in certain cases, be benign. Nor need the tyrant's power last forever, for the power lay not in the man but in the language, which was no-one's private property. Walcott was fond of quoting T.S. Eliot's declaration that "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal".[3]

A tribute —and its near-synonym, the homage— is something you *pay*: a literary debt is acknowledged and repaid with interest, the added value being the new thing made out of the old. Making pre-existing literary artefacts new was at the core of the Modernist project, long before it became a postcolonial one, so we should not be surprised that Walcott's most deliberately self-conscious tribute should be an acknowledgement of his debts to the Modernists Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway:

> Paris, and now its crepuscule
> sets in Pound's eye, now as I watch
> this twinkling hoar-frost photograph
> of the silvery old man bundled, silent, ice-glint

[3] The full sentence reads, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different." T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), 114.

> of frozen fire before the enemy,
> *faites vos hommages*,
> as the tongues of shavings coil from the moving pen,
> to a Paris of plane trees,
> to the peeled ease of Hemingway's early prose,
> *faites vos hommages*,
> to the hills stippled with violet
> as if they had seen Pissarro. (Walcott, 1973, 74)

Hemingway and Pound: the names singled out here are by no means anodyne. Critics have often drawn attention to Walcott's early debt to T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, or Hart Crane whereas here the names which spring most readily to the mind of the poet himself are, politically at least, more problematic ones: Hemingway and Pound. The lines quoted make clear that the debt to Hemingway is to a certain aspect of his style, which Walcott renders through assonance and oxymoron: "the peeled ease of Hemingway's early prose". It is important that we note that Walcott does not pretend to admire *everything* about Hemingway's style. Tributes are naturally discriminating, selective, pointing not to general qualities, but to particular ones, as worthy of respect or affection and which one seeks to emulate. As Walcott makes clear elsewhere, paring down to the essential is both a moral exercise and the only way to separate the reprehensible artist from his art:

> But something more happens in Hemingway, and it supersedes all his vanity. What happens is the opposite, a humility that he never lost towards the art of writing. That humility is in the service of the natural world and not that of the bars, the boasting and the violence. (Walcott, 1998, 113)

The affinity that the homage sets up with Pound, on the other hand, is more problematic in that it is a sympathetic mini-portrait of Pound the man. The poetic affinities between Walcott and Pound have often been discussed[4] but in this particular case the dialogue is not so much between poet and poet as between poet and photographer. The "twinkling hoar-frost photograph" brings to mind Henri Cartier-Bresson's 1971 photograph which Walcott must surely have seen in New York.[5] These lines are both ekphrastic and

[4] See, for example, Line Henrikson's aptly titled *Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound's* Cantos *and Derek Walcott's* Omeros *as Twentieth-Century Epics*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.

[5] The photograph can be found at the Museum of Modern Art's website. Walcott may later have seen Vittorugo Contino's photographs in Gianfranco Ivancich, ed.,

clearly share the French photographer's compassionate and respectful attitude towards the sitter in the portrait: "the silvery old man bundled, silent, ice-glint / of frozen fire before the enemy". To declare compassion and respect for someone whom many see, not as a great poet who had lost his political way, but as an unrepentant, anti-Semitic traitor was a bold thing for Walcott to do. So why did he do it?

The respect Walcott felt for Pound may have stemmed from his perception of their mirror experience of self-imposed exile. Pound (like Hemingway) came into his own when he left the United States for Europe, where he developed a transnational world-view and a poetics that embraced "the shades / of borrowed ancestors". According to Caryl Philips, it was during his unhappy sojourn in New York in 1958 that Walcott came into his own: "In New York, by learning what he wasn't, Walcott quickly absorbed the lesson of what he was: a West Indian."[6] The experience of being an outsider liberated him into the realization that poets need not be bound by geopolitical barriers: their imagination is a passport, a poetic licence, which sets them free to roam as they please among whatever literary company they find congenial. In Walcott's eyes Pound's attitude of distance and defiance is what enabled him to write, from a cage in Pisa, some of his truest and most beautiful lines, from Canto LXXXI: "What thou lovest well is thy true heritage."

Still, literary company is one thing, political allegiances another. Walcott was eighteen and had just self-published his first book of poems when the scandal erupted of the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound, then interned in St. Elizabeth's Hospital.[7] That very real tale of what happened to a poet when he meddled in politics may well have influenced Walcott's own desire to remain aloof from the politics, including the cultural politics, of his time. As someone born in the multi-racial Caribbean, Walcott would have been all too well aware of the dangers posed by politics based on racial identity. Indeed, when in *Omeros* he ventures to cast into verse the St. Lucian parable of the black frigate and the white herring gull (Walcott, 1990, 158-159), the note he strikes does not quite ring true.

Ezra Pound in Italy: From the Pisan Cantos (New York: Rizzoli International Publications,1984).

[6] *New York Review of Books*, July 29, 2020.

[7] A short account of the ensuing controversy may be found at http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/pound-bollingen.html

Ultimately, the homage to Hemingway and Pound has to do with Walcott's early plea for compassion, his confronting, in "Ruins of a Great House" (Walcott, 1986, 19-21), the troubling fact that Raleigh the admirable poet and Raleigh the slave-trader had been housed in the same frail flesh. It *is* possible to pay tribute to Raleigh the poet while condemning Raleigh the slave-owner but only if, like W.B. Yeats, one constructs a categorical distinction between the writer and his work. In the very first lines of "A General Introduction for my Work", Yeats posited the following as his first poetic principle:

> A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. Dante and Milton had mythologies, Shakespeare the characters of English history or of traditional romance; even when the poet seems most himself, when he is Raleigh and gives potentates the lie, or Shelley "a nerve o'er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of this earth," or Byron when "the soul wears out the breast" as "the sword outwears its sheath," he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.[8]

Both Walcott and Yeats had at least one particular and shared reason to want to separate "the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast" from the poet striving for "an ideal something intended, complete": both were prey to the sin of lust, a demon which neither found diminished with age. Walcott was not proud of, though he never apologized for, his marital infidelities, nor for what Kwame Dawes calls "those goatish years" which in 2010 came back to haunt him and cost him the Oxford professorship. Some of the tributes made to Walcott at the time of his death face up to this question and they resolve it in this same separation between the writer and his work, finding compassion for the one and admiration for the other not incompatible. Perhaps it is poetry itself which allows us to do this since, according to John Keats, the very nature of poetry is to allow us to dwell "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".[9] One contemporary poet who offers us just such an experience of suspended judgement is Terrance Hayes, in a sonnet which wittily begins, "Maybe I was too hard on Derek Walcott." (Hayes, 2018, 30)

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[8] W.B Yeats, "A General Introduction for my Work", written in 1937, and first published in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan 1961). It would, I think, be productive to relate Yeats' "phantasmagoria" to Walcott's "phantasmal peace" (Walcott, 1986, 464-465).

[9] John Keats, in a letter to his brothers, 21 December, 1817.

Walcott did not only *make* tributes, of course, he also received them. So much so that this collection is only the latest in a very long line. The general chorus of critical praise began as long ago as 1962, with the early and much-quoted endorsement by Robert Graves, then Oxford Professor of Poetry: "Derek Walcott handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most (if not any) of his contemporaries." In the 1970s Walcott benefitted from the patronage of Robert Lowell and his influential circle of friends, and from the 1980s his career was helped by his friendship with the major poets that were Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney. Praise poured out from almost every quarter when Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1992 and each new collection brought more prizes and fresh accolades. Book reviews, such as that of Adam Kirsch in the *New Yorker*, gave rise to new critical insights.[10] Anniversaries were flamboyantly fêted: Archie Markham wrote his magnificent "A Few Lines from Philoctete's Epic" for his 73rd birthday and for his 75th in 2005, *Callaloo* brought out a special bumper issue. Indeed, as can be seen in the otherwise fine biographies by Bruce King and Edward Baugh, the chronicle of the last years of Walcott's life can all too easily be reduced to a long list of ceremonies attended and prizes won.

Such relentless praise is bound to create some unease, if not outright resentment. Kwame Dawes finely captures this in the poem which opens this collection, "Inheritance", when he speaks of Walcott "chipping away at his own epitaph", a phrase in which the epitaph is both the *work* which continued at a high level until the very end of the life, and the *words* of an aging and ailing man whose attention was not always engaged by every single one of the many people anxious to speak to him. These are iconoclastic times and, as has been often remarked, poets should not live too long. Several younger writers, not included here, experienced Walcott's persistent literary presence as anything but benign. One such is Kei Miller, whose unbecoming obituary of Walcott, entitled "In the shadow of D.W. 1930-2017", was published not once, but twice, in *Poetry Review* (Miller, 2017). There had been previous dissenters, of course, such as Craig Raine, but Raine's attack, published in his own journal *Arete* in the early 1990s, had been on the work, not the man.

[10] Adam Kirsch's article, "Full Fathom Five: Derek Walcott's Seascapes" was published on January 26, 2014. It is available here: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/03/full-fathom-five-2

When Walcott died in 2017, he was accorded a state funeral, in the form of a Methodist service in the Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Castries. Edward Baugh and Monsignor Patrick Anthony gave moving eulogies, and no less than five St Lucian poets —John Robert Lee, Kendal Hippolyte, Jane King-Hippolyte, Mcdonald Dixon, and Adrian Augier — were there to read from his work. Such homage alone bears witness to the wealth of Walcott's local legacy while, worldwide, the links to the obituaries collected for the online magazine *Repeating Islands* run to over sixteen pages.[11] Some of these links are no longer accessible, either because they have gone dead or because they are behind paywalls. Some are perfunctory, written in indifferent *reuterese*, some are simply reprints of a former interview or tribute, but those from Wole Soyinka and Patrick Chamoiseau are exceptionally fine and, taken as a whole, the obituaries do justice to the literary stature of the writer, and to the breadth of his influence.

With so many tributes already available elsewhere, some explanation needs to be given for the present collection. Three years after the funeral, Eric Doumerc and myself, working together at the University of Toulouse, felt that the time had come to collect some more measured responses to a great poet's death. The contents of this collection are the responses received to the invitation we launched on March 17th, 2020, at the beginning of what turned out to be the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The invitation was non-directive: contributors could write on any aspect of the man or the work that moved them and and in any form they liked. As can be seen, we received many responses, some from lifelong friends and writers, others from equally devoted readers. Inevitably, some invitations went astray or arrived at an awkward time. We have included many of those who were unable to be present at the party in the "Select Bibliography" at the end of this book. No anthology can offer an exhaustive view of its subject but practical constraints and sheer chance will sometimes introduce into the final collection an element of serendipity, allowing us to hope that readers, whether they are reading from cover to cover or simply browsing through, will experience some of the excitement —dare we call it elation?— which springs from things unexpectedly juxtaposed.

The sheer number and variety of the tributes received —17 poems, 8 essays, 6 memoirs— made the final arranging of the pieces difficult. We were at one time tempted by a random, alphabetical organization, following the

[11] Links to these obituaries can be found in the "Select Bibliography" at the end of this volume.

method used by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes for *The Rattle Bag* since, like theirs, our anthology "had amassed itself like a cairn". But in the end, we decided that it would be more reader-friendly to arrange the contributions into four sections, very loosely based on affinities of focus. Thus, the first section faces the question of influence and offers re-readings of the early work, whereas the second pays tribute to Walcott's visual imagination and his work in the theatre. In Section 3 the reader will find reflections on Walcott's presence in the academic world, and the tributes in section 4 offer some very diverse views on Walcott's legacy. The end result, we feel, is an uncontrived conversation proposing perspectives on a poet, playwright and painter. Such a conversation is characteristically Caribbean in that, to paraphrase Pam Mordecai, it is neither linear nor dialectical but exhibits a tendency to perceive and construe experience in sometimes unresolved pluralities: a truly "prismatic consciousness".

By no means all of the tokens of affection gathered here came *after* the funeral. Although some were written especially in response to our invitation, others were retrieved from previous work. We believe that this *ad hoc* temporal mixture provides a way of looking both backwards and forwards at Walcott's work, constructing a retrospect that might open up a new prospect and so, go some way towards answering the question asked by Terence Hayes in the 2018 Blaney lecture: "Where does Walcott go now?" Perhaps one indirect answer to Hayes' question might be taken to speak for all. "Now that he is gone," wrote Jonathan Galassi, Walcott's editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, "we feel his enduring presence in an entirely new way." Long after the funeral, tributes continue to work reciprocally, illuminating both the admirer and the person or work admired, and strengthening the reading community from which they spring. It needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us that Walcott's work remains with us, *here*, a constant and community-inspiring presence.

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KWAME DAWES

INHERITANCE

O Christ, my craft and the long time it is taking! —Derek Walcott

I

In the shade of the sea grape trees the air is tart
with the sweet sour of stewed fruit rotting
about his sandalled feet. His skin,
still Boston pale and preserved with Brahman
devotion by the hawkish woman
who smells cancer in each tropical wind,
is caged in shadows. I know those worn eyes,
their feline gleam, mischief riddled;
his upper lip lined with a thin stripe
of tangerine, the curled up nervousness
of a freshly shaved moustache. He is old
and cared for. He accepts mashed food
though he still has teeth—she insists and love
is about atoning for the guilt
of those goatish years in New England.
A prophet's kind of old. Old like casket-
aged genius. Above, a gull surveys
the island, stiches loops through the sea and sky—
an even horizon, the bias on which
teeters a landscape, this dark loam of tradition
in which seeds split into tender leaves.

II

The smudge of colours spreads and dries in the sun.
The pulpy paper sucks in the watercolor,
and the cliché of the sea and a fresh beach
seems too easy for a poem. He has written
them all, imagined the glitter and clatter
of silver cuirasses, accents of crude
Genoese sailors poisoning the air,
the sand feeling for the first time the shadow
of flag and plumed helmet—this old story
of arrival that stirred him as a boy,
looking out over the open plains,
as he cluttered the simple island
with the intrigues of blood and heroes,
his gray eyes searching out an ancestry
beyond the broad laughter and breadfruit-
common grunts of the fishermen, pickled
with rum and the *picong* of *kaiso*,
their histories as shallow as the trace
of soil at the beach's edge where crippled
corn bushes have spouted. That was years ago;
he has now exhausted the jaundiced language
of a broken civilization.
These days he just chips at his own epitaph,
A conceit of twilights turning into
Bare and bleak nights. He paints, whistling
Sparrow songs while blistering in the sun.

III

The note pad, though, is not blank. The words start,
thirteen syllables across the page, then seven
before the idea hesitates. These days
he does not need to count, there is in his head
a counter dinging an alarm like the bell
of his old Smith Corona. His line breaks
are tidy dramas of his entrances
and exits, he will howl before the darkness.
The ellipsis is the tease of a thought,
the flirtatious lift of a yellow skirt
showing a brown taut thigh—a song he knows
how to hum but can't recall the lyrics, man—
an airy metaphor—taken up
by a flippant sea breeze going some place
inland, carrying the image, snagged
by the olive dull entanglement
of a thorny patch. At eight he lays
the contents of his canvas book bag
on the sand, organizing the still life
like honed stanzas. He scoops the orange pulp
of papaya, relishing the taste of fruit, this bounty
harvested from the ant-infested fragile tree
that bleeds each time its fruit is plucked.
The flesh is sunny. He knows the fishermen warn
it will cut up a man's nature, dry up
his sap; that women feed their men pureed
papaya in tall glasses of rum-punch
to tie them down, beached, benign pirogues
heading nowhere. He dares the toxins
to shrivel him, to punish him
for the chronic genius of crafting poems
from the music of a woman's laugh
while he chews slowly. A poem comes to him
as they sometimes do in the chorus
of a song. It dances about his head.
He does not move to write it down—it will wait
If it must, and if not, it is probably
An old sliver of long discarded verse.

IV

The old men in the rum shop are comforted
as they watch him limp along the gravel
road, wincing at the sharp prod of stones
in his tender soles, the knees grinding
at each sudden jar—just another ancient
recluse with his easel folded under
his arm, a straw hat, the gull-gray eyes
seeing the sea before he clears the hill.
They know him, proud of the boy—bright as hell
and from good people. There is no shared language
between them, just the babel of rum talk
and cricket sometimes. Under his waters
he talks of Brussels, Florence, barquentines,
Baudelaire, rolling the words around
like a cube of ice—they like to hear
the music he makes with tongue; the way
he tears embracing this green island,
this damn treasure, this shit hole of a treasure.
Sometimes if you don't mind sharp, you would think
him white, too, except for the way him hold
him waters, carry his body against the sun
with the cool, cultivated calm of a rumhead.
Him say home like it come from a book;
Hard to recognize when him say home
That is this dry beach head and tired earth
Him talking. They like it, anyway, the way
They like to hear "Waltzing Mathilda" sung
With that broad Baptist harmony to a *cuatro*
Plunked, to hear it fill an old song night.

V

If he is my father (there is something
of that fraying dignity, and the way
genius is worn casual and urbane—aging
with grace) he has not lost much over the years.
The cigarette still stings his eyes and the scent
of Old Spice distilled in Gordon's Dry Gin
is familiar here by the sea where a jaunty
shanty, the cry of gulls and the squeak
of the rigging of boats are a right backdrop—
but I have abandoned the thought, the search
for my father in this picture. He's not here,
though I still come to the ritual death watch
like a vulture round a crippled beast,
the flies already bold around its liquid
eyes, too resigned to blink. I have come
for the books, the cured language, the names
of this earth that he has invented,
the stories of a a town, and the way
he finds women's slippery parts in the smell
and shape of this island, the making
and unmaking of a city through
the epic cataclysm of fire,
eating the brittle old wood, myths dancing
in the thick smoke like the gray ashen debris
of sacrifice. It is all here with him—
this specimen living out his twilight days,
prodigious as John's horror—the green
uncertain in the half light. When we meet
he is distant, he knows I want to draw
him out, peer in for clues. He will not be drawn out,
he is too weary now. He points his chin
to the rum shop, to an old man, Afolabe,
sitting on the edge of a canoe, black
as consuming night. I can tell
that he carries a new legend in his terrible
soul each morning, a high tower over the sea.

VI

I could claim him easily, make of him
a tale of nurture and benign neglect;
he is alive, still speaks, his brain clicks
with the routine of revelations
that can spawn in me the progeny
of his monumental craft. These colonial
old men, fed on cricket and and the tortured
indulgences of white schoolmasters
patrolling the mimic island streets
like gods growing gray and sage-like in the heat
and stench of the Third World; they return
to the reactionary nostalgie
during their last days—it is the manner
of aging, we say, but so sad, so sad.
I could adopt him, dream of blood and assume
his legacy of a divided self.
But it would ring false quickly; after all
my father saw the Niger eating out
a continent's beginnings; its rapid
descent to the Atlantic; he tasted
the sweet *kelewele* of an Akan
welcome, and cried at the uncompromising
flame of *akpetechi*. The blood of his sons
was spilled like libation into the soil, and more:
in nineteen twenty-six, an old midwife
buried his bloodied navel-string, and the afterbirth
of his arrival, at the foot of an ancient
cotton tree there on the delta islands
of Calabar. My blood defines the character
of my verse. Still, I pilfer (a much better word),
rummage through the poet's things to find the useful,
how he makes a parrot flame a line
or a cicada scream in wind; the names
he gives the bright berries of an island
in the vernacular of Adam and the tribe.

VII

I carry the weight of your shadow always,
while I pluck through your things for the concordance
of your invented icons for this archipelago.
Any announcement of your passing
is premature. So to find my own strength,
I seek out your splendid weaknesses.
Your last poems are free of the bombast
of gaudy garments. I can see the knobs
of your knees scarred by the surgeon's incisions
to siphon water and blood from bone;
I stare at your naked torso—the teats
hairy, the hint of a barreled beauty
beneath the folding skin. I turn away
as from a mirror. I am sipping your blood,
tapping the aged sap of your days while you grow
pale. You are painting on the beach, this is how
the poem began—I am watching you watching
the painting take shape. I have stared long enough
that I can predict your next stroke—your dip
into the palette, your grunts, your contemplative
moments, a poised crane waiting for the right
instance to plunge and make crimson ribbons
on a slow moving river. These islands
give delight, sweet water with berries,
the impossible theologies
of reggae, its metaphysics so right
for the inconstant seasons of sun and muscular
storm—you can hear the shape of the landscape
in the groan of the wind against the breadfruit
fronds. I was jealous when at twenty, I found
a slim volume of poems you had written
before you reached sixteen. It has stitched in me
a strange sense of a lie, as if all this
will be revealed to be dust—as if I learned
to pretend one day, and have yet to be found out.

MEMORY-FICTION

STEPHANOS STEPHANIDES

All that Greek Manure under the Green Bananas
(Derek Walcott, 1990, 271)

Line of Flight

I would my body a metronome
With bird vision for a longer flight
Over canopies of trees
Opening suddenly
Into a wider sea
I hold my breath
I listen for my muse
In a miracle of memory
Surging in the scraps of time
My skin rippling with brine
I arrive at distant ports
The buzz of insects drowning
In the murmur of the sea

Soon after I returned to my native island of Cyprus in 1991, to take up a post as one of the founding faculty of the University of Cyprus, I walked into a Nicosia bookshop and I unexpectedly found a pile of Derek Walcott's (then newly published) *Omeros*. It was the year before he won the Nobel Prize. I doubted if anyone knew who Walcott was, and I assumed that the book was there mainly because of its title, which made the promoters of Hellenism a little too proud. For me it was a moment of serendipity. I had first discovered Walcott's poetry in 1978, at the beginning of my Caribbean Odyssey, which in retrospect I call my Second Odyssey. The tradition of the Second Odyssey resists any facile notion of *nostos*. Many stories of Odysseus are not part of the classical Homeric narrative as it is known to us. There are variations about his leavetaking from Ithake and the story of his homecoming takes different forms. Some ancient authors tell that, once

he reached Ithake, he was restless for another Odyssey to Hesperia and beyond, through the Pillars of Hercules to Ulissibona. At the Straits, he did not heed the warning Non Plus Ultra, No More Beyond. Whether he perished there or not is a matter of debate and speculation. Dante Alighieri tells us he ended up in the Inferno for his *hubris*, for daring to undertake this superhuman journey. Are we all heading for inferno, for wanting to seek an exit from this virtually inland sea?

Some tell that Odysseus was tricked into leaving Ithake in the first place. According to fragments of the *Cypria*, the epic cycle of Stasinos, Palamedes tricked the wily Odysseus into leaving Ithake to fight in the Trojan war. Joseph Brodsky –– Walcott's friend –– alludes to Palamedes' trick in his "Odysseus to Telemachus", a poem he wrote to his son while in his American exile.[1]

My own first Odyssey began in 1957. How and why was I tricked into leaving my island in the Levantine Sea? I was tricked by my father who did not tell me of our departure although we were ready to board the SS Messapia departing from the port of Larnaca near the ancient city kingdom of Kition. If I was Telemachus to my father's Odysseus, he did not leave me behind. He did not tell me he was migrating, let alone that he was taking me with him. For Demosthenes (as I named my father in 'The Wind Under My Lips') the flight was an *anabasis*. I could have called him Daedalus. He didn't trick me, he would have said. He spared me the pain of choice and offered me an escape from an uncertain future on the island. Perhaps some Cassandra saw the pain of a history yet to come. After the magic of the journey and its port cities —Piraeus, Corinth, Bari, Venice, Calais — we moved on to settle in Bristol. I felt as if I had been shipwrecked and swallowed by a whale. I would be transformed into an unwilling Stephen, son of Daedalus, dressed in English with a gabardine coat, scarf and school cap, roaming the streets of Bristol, from the Bamboo Club to Colston Hall, from Blackboy Hill to White ladies Road to the Downs and to the river where once ships would sail off to Africa taking slaves across the Middle Passage to the West Indies. In my sense of exile, 'I would turn my mind to unknown arts' and to 'nature unrevealed.'[2] I was always in a time yet to come where home and self are always apprehended but never fully unconcealed. Which way would the gods send me? Why and for how long

[1] Joseph Brodsky. *A Part of Speech* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 58.
[2] See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VIII. The first phrase was used by James Joyce as an epigraph to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in the original Latin: Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes.

before I found an exit? My language was dissolving and I would search for other languages to will me into being.

After twenty years away, my exile should end, I decided. I must return to settle on the island where I dreamt the first dream I remember. An untimely landfall, the chorus said in unison. The village of my childhood was north of the ceasefire line and beyond my reach. Nationalism and intra-tribal ethnic cleansing had torn the place apart. Many took flight in different directions while the memory of others went missing, lay in mass graves, and at the bottom of wells. Kith and kin and the Seers of the Sea signaled I was misguided to return. Who in their right mind returns now? Fly away you still have wings to fly! And what does it mean to return anyway? I listen to my seers who illuminate my journey. The Alexandrian poet Cavafy tells me the island gives you the journey. She has nothing else to give you. No more riches. May your journey be long. Don't rush home too quickly.[3] Echoing lines from Euripides' *Helen*, the poet Seferis asks: "And this island. Who knows it?" … "What is a god? What is not a god? And what is in between them?".[4] And, in "Portami il girasole", Eugenio Montale proclaims, *Svanire / è dunque la ventura delle venture*. To vanish is the greatest of fortunes.[5]

This island is a place that has always been yet will never quite be…and the creatures that inhabit it metamorphose and space out their boundaries. There are migratory birds and endemic birds. And there are those who stay close to the village well and those who sail off or fly away over the sea. In the courtyard of my great aunt Alisavou, I remember watching larva —furry creatures— eating ravenously at mulberry leaves with the expectation of becoming a winged imago. And what kind of creature am I? Do I eat away at the world looking for a true image among the mirages? Montale sings of the eel, which travels from icy waters as far south as the Sargasso Sea to find its paradise of fecundation …*A paradisi di fecondazione / L'anima verde che cerca / Vita*…and then returns to icy northern seas.[6] What hidden embodied memory animates the life force that drives us on our journey? I left the shores of my divided island wanting the illimitable sea to remember me. Illuminate my journey., with moments to clear my spirit of doubt and loss. I remember planning to remember.

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[3] For the full text of "Ithaka", see *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems* (Princeton University Press, 1975) trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.
[4] For the full text of "Helen", see *George Seferis: Complete Poems* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1995) 177-179. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.
[5] From *Ossia de seppia*, 1925.
[6] From "L'anguilla" in *La Bufera e altro*, 1956.