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Poet and playwright Derek Walcott received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. He reached this apex of literary achievement by transmitting the Caribbean culture with strength, sensitivity, beauty, and ingenuity.

Derek Walcott was born in 1930 in Saint Lucia, then a British colony. His father died when he was very young, but he was a precocious child and his mother took great care with his education. “I knew from very early on that I was going to be a writer,” he says. Eventually, he studied at both St. Mary University in Saint Lucia and the West Indies University in Jamaica.

The island of Saint Lucia, which became independent in 1979, alternated between British and French rule for centuries, producing a multilingual, multicultural place where Methodism and Catholicism coexisted and combined with religions of African influence. Walcott’s own works are a reaffirmation of the Caribbean culture and identity. The Caribbean is not a copy of anything, says the poet. “It is an amalgam of everyone’s experiences.” It is also an amalgam of peoples—Africans, Indians, Chinese, English, Dutch, and French—in a unique environment that developed its own unique culture and identity.

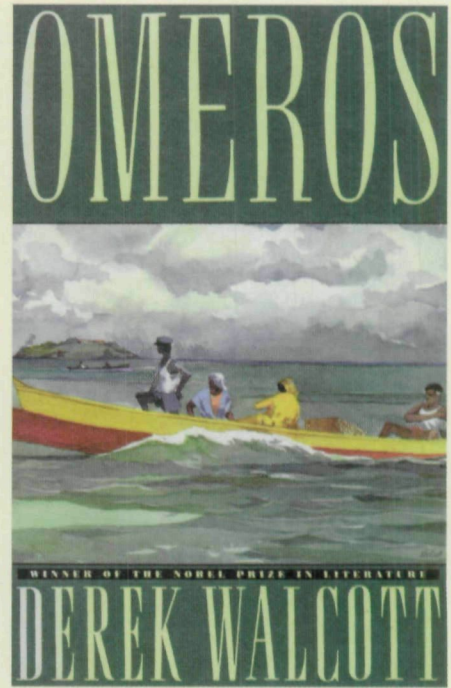
by Enriqueta Cabrera
Translated by Kathy A. Ogle

Walcott recalls his first years as a writer and painter. It was an uncommon thing in the Caribbean to dedicate oneself to writing back then. There was no sophisticated audience, he says, but there was an audience that could be moved by feeling, by vitality. He recalls feeling that writers had the responsibility to move people. This passion vibrates in his poetry and his plays. It is a passion for justice, but above all, the desire to highlight the Caribbean as a culture and as a social reality.

A master of language, Walcott has been on the vanguard of his craft, opening and building a space for the Caribbean's own expression. He has written more than fifteen books of poetry and close to 30 plays. He writes in English and often introduces elements of popular language in Creole. His work is marked by the experiences of the Caribbean people and reflects their identity and their heritage.

The poetry and drama of Walcott is the voice of the Caribbean.

Between 1959 and 1976, Walcott directed the Trinidad Theater Workshop (called the Little Carib Theater Workshop until 1966). It was an intense and passionate time period during which he worked part-time with a troupe of actors and also held another job, since theater didn't pay him enough to live on. At that time, occasional contributions came in from the Rockefeller Foundation. Successes led the company to do presentations outside the country in



Jamaica, Guyana, Toronto, Boston, and New York. Walcott eventually also became a professor of drama.

Dream on Monkey Mountain is considered Walcott's greatest work and one in which he makes a great effort to interpret the nature of the Caribbean identity. Reality and dreams are interwoven in the drama in which the main character, Makak (French patois for "ape") faces imprisonment and dreams that he is crowned king

Derek Walcott

The Voice

of the Caribbean

Saint Lucia's favorite son discusses the emerging identity in literature and prose unique to the islands

in the romantic Africa of his roots. Some say *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's theories of the black Orpheus and by the work of French sociologist Franz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*). But Walcott doesn't make direct references to the classics; they are names from the Atlantic, geographic parallels, but they are not culturally integrated or articulated. What does exist in terms of reference points are fragmentary memories, associations, echoes of previous cultures. The essential is Caribbean.

Another of Walcott's great works is *Omeros*, historic reflections divided into 192 songs and written in a rhythmic verse of poetic metaphors. Jöran Jmoberg describes it in the following way: "*Omeros* is . . . an epic poetic tale with a multitude of different short stories, flashbacks, conversations, monologues, episodes, descriptions, and impressions, depicting in a minute, detailed way the Caribbean world and all its everyday life, its human beings, animals, nature, waters, and woods . . . Likewise, as a background to the life of people in our time, Walcott refers to violent events in history: the siege of Troy, the extermination of the Aruac people in the Caribbean by conquistadors, the eighteenth century fights in the Caribbean between the English and the French navies, as well as the prolonged catastrophe that extinguished most native Americans. Or the cruel attacks on African villages by slave traders, the perpetual tragedy of the captives who had to leave their homes, their families, their professions, and their tools, to try to create a new identity beyond the Atlantic."

But Derek Walcott thinks it sounds "too pompous" to call *Omeros* an epic poem.

"I wanted to celebrate the island, the people there," he says. Nevertheless, the form was a challenge that he enjoyed immensely. He wanted, above all, to delight the reader.

Derek Walcott received the call telling him he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature early one morning. He remembers the shock, followed by the huge celebra-

tions. Soon he saw the need to separate the person from the celebration and to see the prize as something more for the poetry than for the poet. The Nobel Prize is "good because of what it can do, does, or will do for Caribbean literature," he said once in a televised interview. "It was very exciting."

When Professor Kjell Espmark, member of the Swiss Academy, introduced Walcott as the Nobel Prize winner for Literature, he said; "Trying to capture Derek Walcott's oceanic work in a formula would be an absurd enterprise." He went on to quote from Walcott's *The Star-Apple Kingdom*:

*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.*

"These lines call to mind how Walcott unites the white and black on his father's as well as on his mother's sides," Espmark continued, "but they also remind us of the fact that in his poetry he amalgamates material from different cultures: West Indian, African, and European."

In the same speech, Espmark also quoted from another of Walcott's autobiographical texts, *Another Life*:

*I watched the vowels curl from
the tongue of the carpenter's plane,
resinous, fragrant.*

"Derek Walcott's extraordinary idiom is born in the meeting between European virtuosity and the sensuality of the Caribbean Adam," Espmark says.

Today, Derek Walcott is receiving ongoing recognition for his poetry and plays. He is one of the best known voices of the Caribbean and is a unique voice in poetry, drama, and criticism.

Walcott continues to write. He also teaches "Creative Writing" at Boston University and derives particular pleasure from encouraging new writers. He also continues to paint, inaugurating his first solo art exhibition in November 2005 at the June Kelly Gallery in New York City.

The first thing about the Caribbean is that it doesn't have just one essence or nature

Still Life—The Desk, 1998



■ *You published your first poem when you were fourteen, and you wrote five plays and published your first collection of poems by the time you were sixteen. How did this vocation begin?*

My father was a writer. He worked in the civil service but he also wrote plays and was a very good painter and poet. He died when my twin brother and I were young. My mother was a school teacher and encouraged me a great deal. I told her fairly early on that I wanted to do what my father did. She understood me very well and she always looked for ways to motivate me. This was a determining factor. I knew very early on that I was going to be a writer, and I got to work on it very early. I also had very good teachers who encouraged me from elementary school on. Some

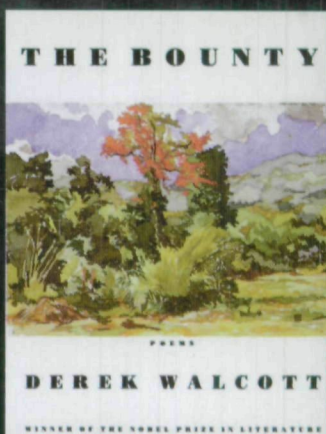
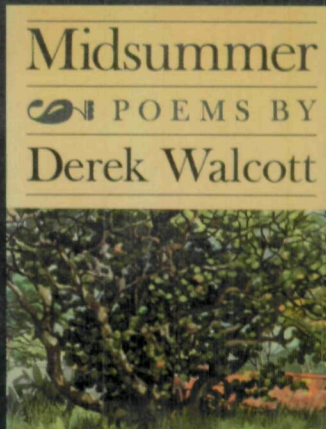
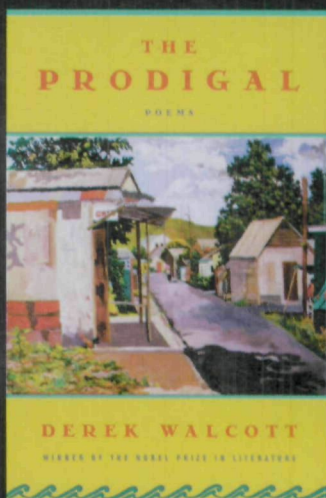
poets are precocious, and I was one of them, but I owe a lot to my environment.

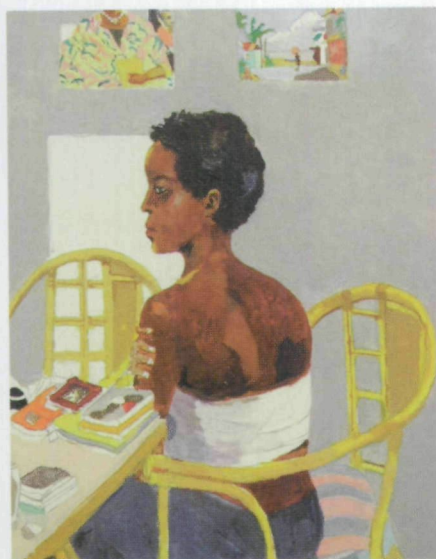
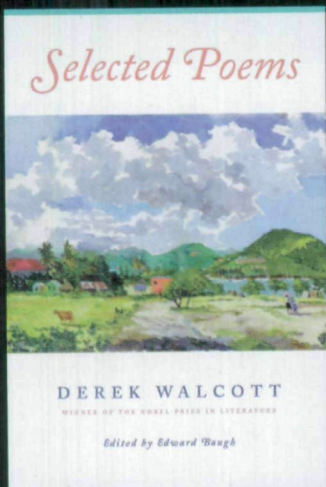
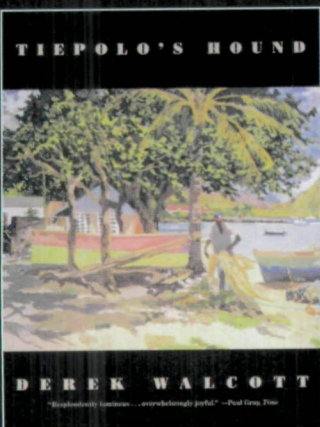
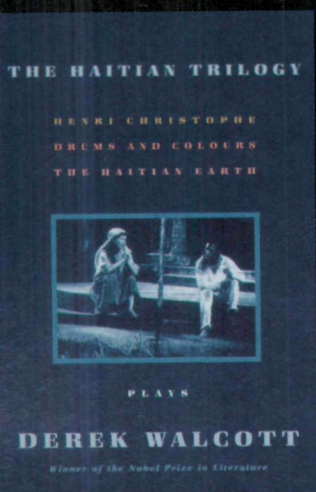
■ *I imagine that you read a great deal as a child. Do you remember some of the authors you were reading back then?*

Well, yes, I read a lot. I read at a level that was much higher than my age. I read Dickens, Walter Scott, Sabatini, and many, many poets. I read Shakespeare, also.

■ *I understand that you also began painting when you were young.*

Yes, exactly. Throughout my life, I have combined writing and painting. In fact, I had an exhibit last year. When I was young, my friends and I had an important relationship with a painter named Harold





Portrait of Claudia in Yellow Armchair, 2005

Simons. He encouraged me a lot. He was a friend and a professional painter, and we continued painting together.

■ *They say that you experienced—and therefore reflect—the antagonism between the European Anglophone and Francophone cultures and the Caribbean culture, and between the English, French, and Creole languages. Is the search for identity at the heart of your literary work?*

I suppose you could use those terms, though I don't like them because they are simplistic. I think it's not so much about resolving who I am or who I was, but about representing where I come from—who the people and landscape are in my work. It is not as much about trying to express the conflict between the European and the African as it is about trying to express the presence of something that had not been panted, pronounced, or said before.

■ *Are Identity and Nation two concepts that you link in your work?*

I have never wanted to make it very political. I think what you have to understand is that there are a lot of things developing in the Caribbean that are happening at the same time. It's limiting to isolate factors, I think.

Garden with Stone Table, 2000

■ *Then, perhaps what is Caribbean is not so much about a conflict as it is about a combination, an amalgam.*

The conflict is there, because of history, but in terms of today's reality, it's not an active conflict, though it could be in terms of the people who are still struggling.

■ *In relation to your autobiographical work, Another Life, some critics say that you are subconsciously programmed to "Caribbeanize" the European culture. Is there something to this, or is it just a Caribbean sensitivity that emerges from your work?*



Some poets are precocious, and I was one of them, but I owe a lot to my environment

I think the people who say that are in the Caribbean, but they don't understand it. They don't understand that the Caribbean is something original in itself, not just something that has to copy the European. Maybe that's what it looks like at first glance, but the fact that we speak the same language as they do in Great Britain doesn't mean that we want to be English, and the fact that we have the same language as France doesn't mean that we are trying to be French in spirit or in time. We are not trying to copy any of the empires; we have too much of our own culture around us. Reality is the opposite of that.

■ *Could you talk a little bit about the nature of the Caribbean?*

The first thing about the Caribbean is that it doesn't have just one essence or nature. This is the interesting thing about the Caribbean; it has different cultures simultaneously. Everything happens at the same time and doesn't develop in a linear fashion. Linear ideas can be very dangerous because they can lead to nationalism or even fascism when a single element of culture is isolated. There is too much emphasis on the African culture in the Caribbean, and there should be much more respect paid to the Indian



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and Chinese cultures in terms of color and origin. I say this even though it irritates some people, because there is a risk involved when we tend to leave out people, like people from the West Indies, who have contributed to our culture. We should mix these cultures. We should mix the African philosophy and culture with the Indian. It is the mixture of cultures that is the essence of the Caribbean. I think that is very exciting.

■ *Thinking about your work in theater and poetry, which do you prefer?*

You have a lot of company in theater—actor friends and many people who get involved in the production. I had a theater company almost fifty years ago. You work as a group and you share the experience with more people. It's different from poetry where you work in an isolated fashion, though I also work with lyrical poetry, hoping to involve the reader in the enjoyment.

■ *You have had a great interest in the sea and the Homeric world that you called "an echo in the throat." Your poem, *Omeros: Is it an epic poem?**

I think that if we rely only on the traditional definition of epic, it is not an epic. It is not like the epic of Eneas, for example, where there is a heroic narrative, in which the primary character does something for others. The hero in my poem is a simple fisherman who doesn't conquer anything and who works with his element—the sea. That's the life of the Caribbean. That's what the poem refers to in terms of the elements that make it up. It's not about a glorious epic poem of the Caribbean.

Of course you could have some cultural references in terms of one language in particular, and if you are Octavio Paz and you are Mexican, you have to allow the presence of Cervantes. You can't deny it. You're not isolated from the culture that



surrounds you. That's why I include the cultures that surround the fisherman in my book. He is an illiterate fisherman, but his natural knowledge is more than that of your average hero, or of your average heroic act.

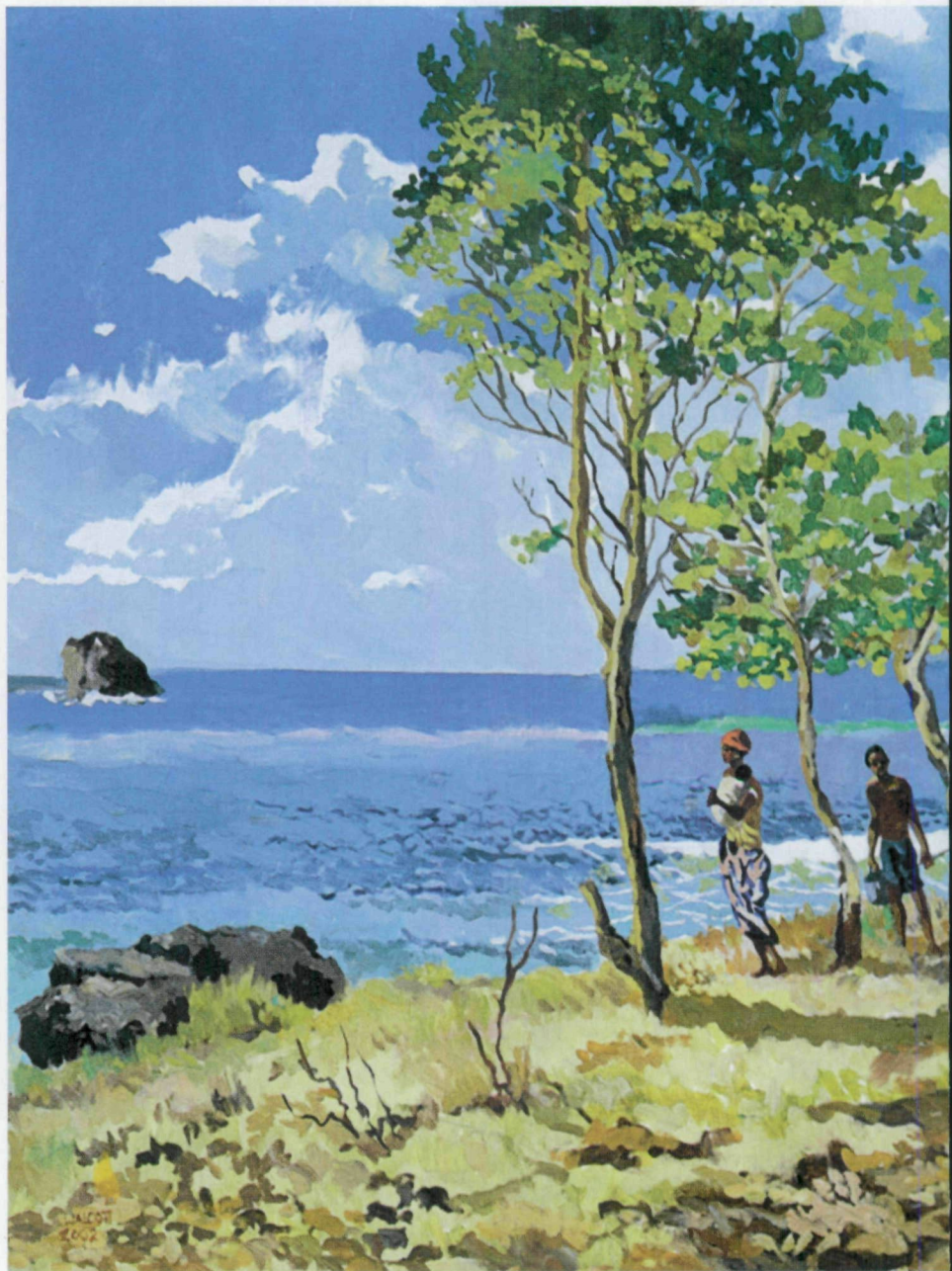
■ *You received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. Was it a surprise? What significance does this high recognition have for you, your literature, and for the Caribbean? Also, how has your life changed since 1992?*

Well, it was a pleasure to receive the Nobel Prize. It wasn't a total surprise because my name had been discussed as a possibility in the previous year also. So when it happened, it was a pleasure, a great joy, and I was very proud. And it was very good for the Caribbean and for Caribbean literature, and it helped people pay attention to the region. I was treated very well at home when I won; there were enormous celebrations. Without exaggerating and without drama, I think it was very important for the island of Saint Lucia. There have been two Nobel Prize winners in the Caribbean; Saint John Perse, the French-born writer, received the award in 1960.

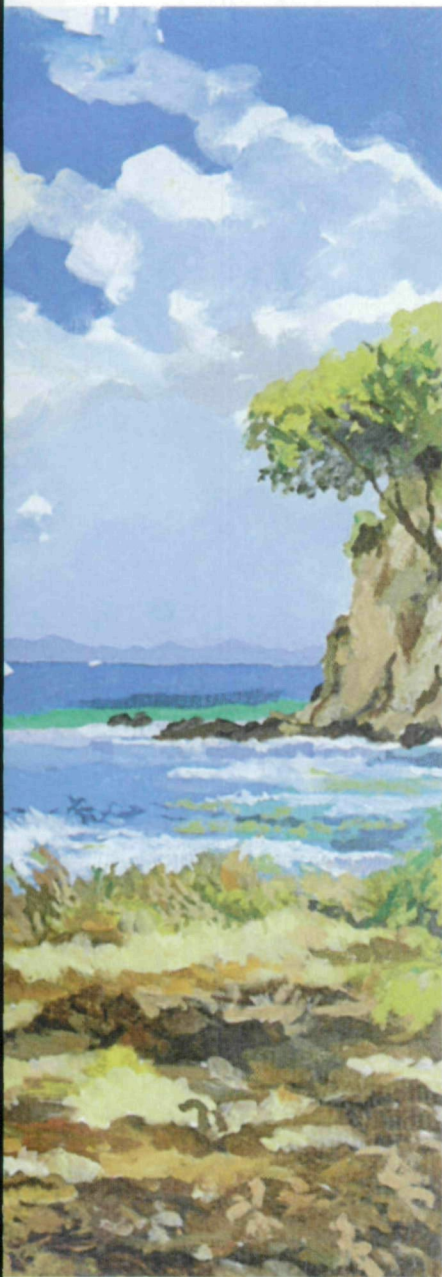
■ *What is your life like now, between Boston, New York, and Saint Lucia?*

Well, I have been invited to many countries all over the world. There is a lot of curiosity about the Caribbean in different countries. I have been treated very well in my visits. I'm going to Italy. I just returned from Greece. And the invitations continue and they are truly very flattering, enriching, interesting. I am very happy to go to Italy. Where I haven't visited sufficiently is Central and South America, and I have very little knowledge of Mexico, which is something I should remedy. ❀

Enriqueta Cabrera is a Mexican journalist and social anthropologist who has written about Mexican national issues and foreign relations for the past twenty-five years. She has been director of El Gallo Illustrated and director general of El Nacional. All artwork courtesy of June Kelly Gallery, New York. All book covers courtesy of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



There is too much emphasis on the African culture in the Caribbean, and there should be much more respect paid to the Indian and Chinese cultures in terms of color and origin



Seascape with Figures, 2002

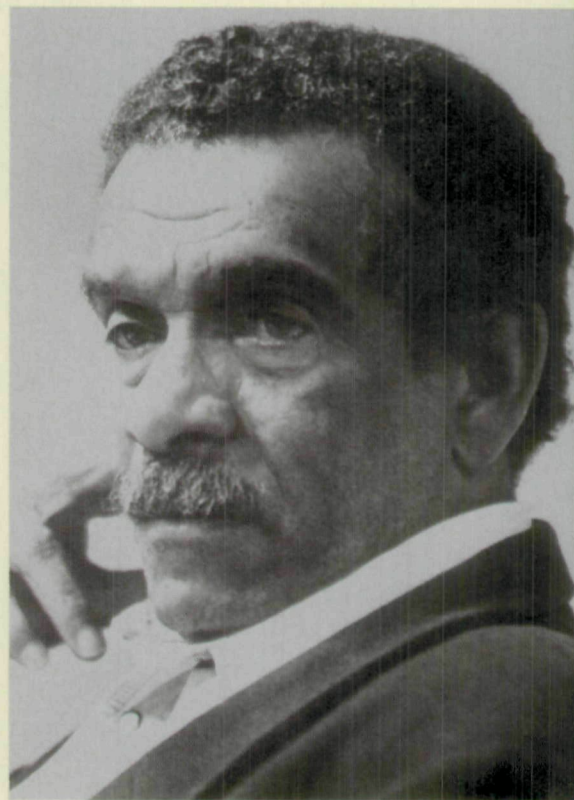
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