INTRODUCTION

by Edward Baugh

DEREK ALTON WALCOTT was born in Castries, St. Lucia, on January 23, 1930. His parents were of modest means but appreciable social respectability, part of the island's small native bourgeoisie. St. Lucia, a tiny island in the eastern Caribbean, was then an inconsequential outpost of the British Empire.

Walcott's first published poem appeared in *The Voice of St. Lucia* on August 2, 1944, when he was fourteen years old. Titled "1944," its forty-four lines of Miltonic-Wordsworthian blank verse foreshadow the reach of his poetic ambition. Despite its derivativeness and stylistic rough edges, the poem harbors a maturity beyond the poet's years and prefigures Walcott's fiercely independent thinking—it also signals a poet who would attract controversy. In "1944," the young Walcott advanced the idea that one learns better about God from the teachings of nature than from the teachings of humankind and the Church. Three days after the poem appeared, the paper carried a rejoinder, in efficient, didactic verse, intended as an object lesson to the young poet. Its author was a Roman Catholic priest, a leader of opinion on the island, which was more than 90 percent Roman Catholic, the Walcotts being part of a minuscule Methodist minority. The priest's "Reflections" begins by patronizingly welcoming the impulse of youth to express in verse its love of nature, then proceeds to fault the young poet for his stylistic shortcomings and overreaching, as well as his lapses from tunefulness, but especially to scold him for his "wrong" teaching, which, with its "poison," threatens to undermine the authority of the Church. Questioning the role of religion and the Church, especially in St. Lucia and the West Indies, was to become a recurrent theme in Walcott's work, complicating his deep religious instinct.

Around the time that "1944" was published, Walcott had the transcendent experience, brilliantly described in Chapter 7 of *Another Life* (see page 69), that sealed his commitment to the calling of poetry and to using his poetry to "name" his island and to speak for its people. By age nineteen, he had published, at his own expense, two slim volumes, which showed a remarkably wide range of reading, including Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Pound. When he was twenty, Walcott's first major play, *Henri Christophe*, was produced in Castries by the St. Lucia Arts Guild, of which he was cofounder.

Walcott graduated from high school—St. Mary's College—in 1947, with an outstanding academic record, but having failed to win the Island Scholarship, which would have taken him to university in England and to the cosmopolitan and tradition-rich literary climate for which his intellect and imagination yearned. Instead he had to settle for teaching at his old school. Then, in 1950, he managed an escape of sorts, when, thanks to a Colonial Development and Welfare scholarship, he entered the new University College of the West Indies, at Mona, Jamaica, as one of the first students in the Faculty of Arts. (In 1973 he became the first graduate of the college to be awarded an honorary doctorate of the University of the West Indies, which the college had become.)

Though already steeped, lovingly, in English literary tradition, Walcott found the undergraduate English literature curriculum of the college hidebound, unchallenging to his own already well-informed imagination, unsatisfying to the thirst of the new Caribbean mind. This deficiency was balanced by his creative work, in poetry, drama, and painting, as well as by his being cofounder and editor of the first student magazine. These activities benefited from the stimulus of the unprecedented coming together of bright young minds from across the English-speaking Caribbean. In Jamaica, too, Walcott made two lasting and supportive literary friendships, with John Hearne, a Jamaican novelist, and John Figueroa, a Jamaican poet and professor of education.

Awarded a B.A. in 1953, Walcott remained a fourth year on the Mona campus, ostensibly reading for the diploma in education. The next three years were spent teaching on three islands, including Jamaica, where he was also a feature writer, on literature and the arts, for a weekly newspaper. In the late 1950s, he was commissioned to write *Drums and Colours*, a historical drama-chronicle, to mark the inauguration of the Federation of the West Indies. It was staged in Port of Spain, seat of the Federal Parliament, in 1958. This experience led to Walcott's falling in love with Trinidad, settling there, and founding and directing the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. Some of his most important, path-finding plays, including, most notably, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, were written for the workshop.

In 1962, with *In a Green Night: Poems 1948–1960* (London: Jonathan Cape), Walcott enjoyed the first commercial, international publication of a collection of his poetry. Cape continued to publish his work in England until 1980, when he moved to Faber & Faber. By this time Walcott had long since broken into the United States market, as a result of the cordial professional relationship between Cape and Farrar, Straus & Giroux. The eminent American poet Robert Lowell, who had met Walcott on a visit to Trinidad and had liked the poems Walcott showed him, also recommended to his editor, Robert Giroux, that he publish Walcott, whose selected poems appeared over the Farrar, Straus imprint in 1964, and the company has been his U.S. publisher ever since.

In 1976 Walcott began to prepare himself to leave Trinidad. Shabine, the "red nigger" sailor-poet, protagonist of Walcott's popular narrative-dramatic monologue "The Schooner *Flight*," represents something of the poet's mixed feelings at the time, in loving but feeling the need to leave Trinidad. Two of Walcott's most successful plays, *Remembrance* and *Pantomime*, premiered in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands (1976) and Port of Spain (1978) respectively. He soon began spending much time in the United States, doing university teaching stints. In 1982, Walcott settled at Boston University, where he still teaches creative writing on a part-time basis.

In the States, too, Walcott formed close, influential literary friendships, the most notable being with two other Farrar, Straus poets: Joseph Brodsky, the Russian exile, and Seamus Heaney, an Irishman, who would both become Nobel laureates as well. A triumvirate of top-class outsiders on the American literary scene, they shared a special admiration for the work of W. H. Auden, whom they regarded as a mentor. They collaborated on *Homage to Robert Frost* (1996), three essays in critical appreciation of the great, quintessentially American poet. Some of Walcott's best poems have been addressed to Brodsky, and when Brodsky died in 1996, Walcott was devastated.

The 1980s saw the publication of three collections of new poetry by Walcott, as well as the premieres of five new plays, including *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1983) and *The Haitian Earth* (1984). The 1990s opened with two new works, one in poetry, the other a verse drama, which took Walcott's achievement to new heights. *Omeros* (1990) and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and premiered in 1992, brought to a high point his lifelong, sometimes uneasy engagement with Homer and the classics. The universally acclaimed *Omeros*, a kind of modern, novelized epic, is also a celebration of St. Lucia and its folk. It brought him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992.

More recent new plays include *Walker*, which premiered as an opera in 1993. A version of this work, based on an early, tragic episode in the African-American struggle for freedom, was published in the same volume as *The Ghost Dance* (*Walker and The Ghost Dance*), a play about a tragic episode in the history of Native American resistance to conquest and extermination by the white man.

Walcott had shown a talent for painting from childhood, and for a brief time he had hesitated between painting and poetry as his calling. Although he soon decided that the latter was his forte, he never abandoned painting: landscapes chiefly, and the occasional portrait. His painter's eye for color and light informs his poetic descriptions of landscape, and painting has been one of his themes, most sustainedly in *Another Life* (1973) and *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000). The latter, a highly selective biography of the French Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, interfacing with the story of Walcott's own involvement with painting, is another essay in the art of the long narrative poem.

Based in St. Lucia since the mid-1990s, Walcott lives for part of the year in Greenwich Village and travels extensively across the globe to give readings, to appear at symposia on his work, and to direct his plays. From these and subsequent wanderings he returns, as in *The Prodigal* (2004), to his beloved starting place. It is supreme poetic justice that Columbus Square in Castries was renamed Derek Walcott Square after he won the Nobel Prize, the change dramatizing a country's and a region's effort, through its writers, to name and rename itself.

Walcott is perhaps the most widely acclaimed of the poets who have brought the voice of the Caribbean to the world. In his intense engagement with the local, he has asserted the importance of small places everywhere. His evocation of the sensuous experience of the Caribbean, the modulations of Caribbean light (whether benign, epiphanic, or harsh), the changes of the Caribbean Sea, generates images for apprehending Caribbean experience, for dealing with the pain of history and the colonial legacy of the region, its cultural palimpsest and mosaic. He will always figure commandingly in any consideration of the grappling with that legacy, which has been a major contribution of his generation of Anglophone Caribbean writers. His descriptive mastery of landscape, which draws on his talent as a painter, is always more than mere description, deepening into metaphor. Through his imaginative immersion in great art, he has spoken to central issues of his time, of self and society.

Speaking out of and to Caribbean experience, Walcott speaks to and for the wide world, "for such as our earth is now" ("The Season of Phantasmal Peace"), in anger at racism, at the unjust distribution of the world's wealth, at political tyranny and humankind's inhumane proclivity for violence and war. His anger is all the more eloquent because he is a poet of compassion and love and reverence for life. His representation of large and communal issues is characteristically sharpened by a subtly introduced autobiographical specificity. Running through his work is a dialogue with himself, a process of self-invention. The result is a continuously self-interrogated fictive persona in whose eyes a world takes shape.

The adventure of reading Walcott is also an adventure in poetic form and style, which one may follow chronologically through this selection. He has written excellent free verse but has been from the beginning a believer in the discipline of strict forms. Delighting in the English and classical forms that he inherited, Walcott has found his own voice in modifying, extending, and modernizing them by subtle variations and inventiveness in stanza pattern, meter, and rhyme. His achievement in this regard reached a high point in the later long narratives, beginning with *Omeros*, rigorously sustaining in each one a demanding form that is at the same time dynamically flexible and accommodating. Here also we note his modulations of voice, tone, and language, the interfusion of English and Caribbean speech, whether Anglophone or French Creole. He moves fluently from the plain and low-key to the sonorous and richly metaphorical, the courage of the large utterance.

The evolution of Walcott's craftsmanship is broadly marked by the play of two contending passions, lyric and narrative. It is perhaps only natural that the progressive extension of his poetic reach should have resulted in his recent concentration on the long narrative. But the lyric instinct is always springing in him, and he crosses forms and genres with resourcefulness and meaning-making power, incorporating lyric and dramatic modes—and even qualities of prose fiction—into narrative verse.

To move from "Prelude" to *The Prodigal* is to trace a journey that begins with a precocious setting forth, a vow of dedication to a place and a people and to the practice of poetry in their service. It is to come to a painful and self-scrutinizing awareness of what this commitment entails, including its constricting force against the instinct of imagination to go forth into the world and have access to the enlargement, and challenges, which that move may bring. It is to follow him into the fascinations and terrors of foreign landscapes and great cities, in that separation which brings a sharper knowledge of home. It is to return and return, to the benediction of one's little island but also to the realization that "there are homecomings without home" ("Homecoming: Anse la Raye"). It is to return at last as the Prodigal, to "the nurturing place of earth" (*Tiepolo's Hound*), and yet with one's eyes drawn, in the final phrase of *The Prodigal*, toward "the other shore."

This book is a distillation from the harvest of one of the great poets of the twentieth century. The difficulty was to choose, within tight limits of space, from the abundant output of over fifty years. The aim was to balance variable and overlapping criteria, by choosing poems that represent the range of Derek Walcott's work, poems that are among his best and most important, and poems that I particularly like. The pleasure of choosing was usually inseparable from the pain of having to leave out this or that particular poem.

So, if I felt a twinge of regret at having to omit "A Sea-Chantey," I rationalized that the idea and feeling it embodies are to some extent represented by "As John to Patmos" and "A City's Death by Fire." Again, I might easily have included "Oceano Nox" or "White Magic" (from *The Arkansas Testament*), but I had already chosen "Europa." I could live with omitting "North and South" (from *The Fortunate Traveller*) since "The Fortunate Traveller" remained, and the absence of "The Hotel Normandie Pool" could be compensated somewhat by the inclusion of "Early Pompeian." I also chose with an ear for how one poem speaks to or builds on another, for instance, "Ruins of a Great House" and "The Bright Field," "The Almond Trees" and "Verandah," "The Gulf" and "The Arkansas Testament."

The long narrative poems presented a particular challenge. Rather than take a little bit of this and a little bit of that from each one in order to represent all their topics and narratives, I decided for the most part and where feasible to follow one story line from each. The hope is that the chosen bits will hold together as more or less self-contained narratives that the reader may be drawn to reading through and that will stimulate him or her to read the uncut work.