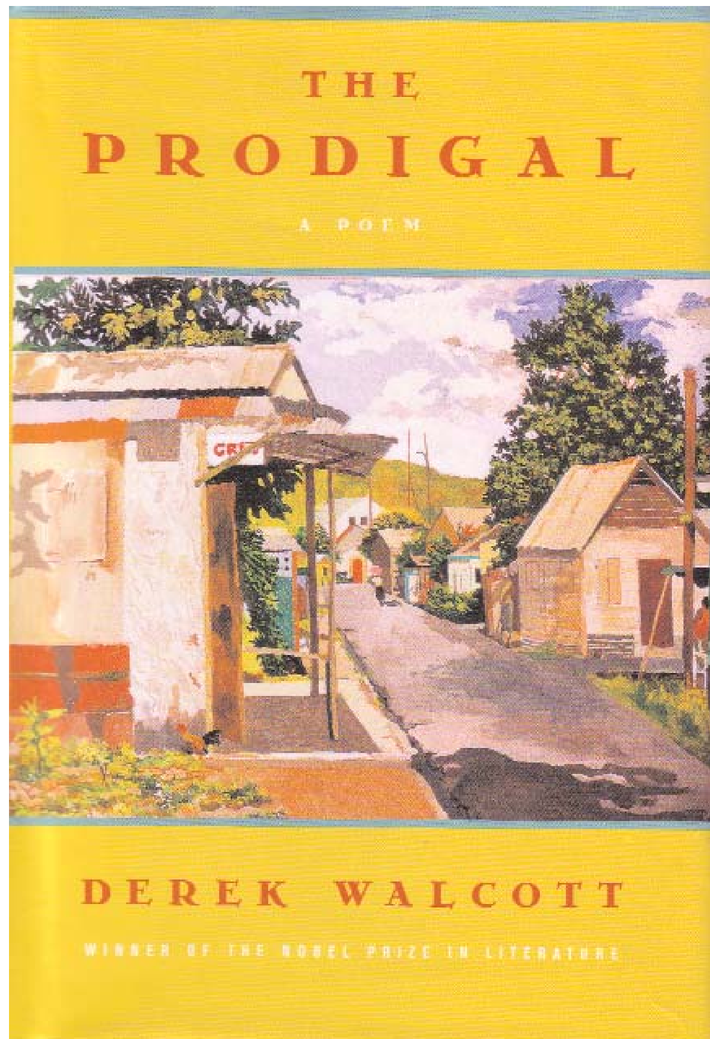
Derek Walcott: The Prodigal

by Anderson Reynolds

"Prodigal, what were your wanderings about? What did you swear to uphold? This (village) filth? Or the aria that soars like a banner from its gates?"

In the discussion that followed the 2005 Derek Walcott Nobel Laureate lecture, a young man from the audience suggested to the great man that it was about time he wrote a novel. Yet a familiarity with Walcott's work would suggest that he has produced at least three volumes of verse that read much like novels because each involves a book-length narrative that has all the elements of a novel, including characters, setting, plot, dialogue, etc. The three works I have in mind include Another Life (1973), Omeros (1990), and most recently The Prodigal (2004).

The Prodigal is about an aging wanderer who has embarked on yet another journey that may well be his last."Perhaps soon, these pages must be closed." This journey is as much mythical, symbolic, and a trip into memory lane as it is geographical. But what is the prodigal in search of? What is the purpose of all his wanderings? At the end of his wanderings would he have found whatever he was looking for, and at what cost? Equally important, will the prodigal finally find his place, finally arrive at a resting place of contentment?



The Pilgrimage

The journey begins in autumn on a train to Pennsylvania. "In autumn, on the train to Pennsylvania,/ he placed his book face-down on the sunlit seat/ and it began to move." Although the prodigal remained unfamiliar with the "staidness of trains" (after all, there were no trains, nor large monuments, nor sky-touching cathedrals in the land of his childhood), trains held a great fascination for him. "There was sweet meditation on a train," and because of "their web of schedules, incoherent announcements, the terror of missing his train, and because trains had a child's delight in motion," they reminded him of novels.

The prodigal's mythical train breaks down in the middle of the nineteenth century, and there, as he steps off the train, he realizes that he has missed the Twentieth Century, time has passed him by. He has grown old. Time has passed by too quickly.

For the prodigal, autumn passes swiftly—"I missed the fall. It went with a sudden flare"—so he arrives in Europe, in Switzerland, the Alps, in the throat of winter. It is a white and cold Europe. A relentless, unfeeling, indifferent Europe rigid in its absoluteness. Not surprisingly, the prodigal, who admits that he is "from a climate without wolves," is terrified and alienated. He said, "My fear was white/ and my belief obliterated." Clearly, winter is not the prodigal's favourite season. In another poem, *A Village Life*, from The Gulf (1970), speaking of his first winter experience, in New York, the poet said, "I watched that winter morning my first snow/ I was a frightened cat in that grey city/ homesick, my desire/ crawled across snow/ like smoke, for its lost fire."

The wintry European world that the prodigal depicts seems to work at several levels. It signals once again that the prodigal

has arrived at the winter of his life, approaching the end of all journeys. It hints at the alienation and disorientation the prodigal had experienced when he first left the Caribbean and ventured into Europe and North America. It may suggest that like the prodigal, Europe is aging. It is a civilization in decay. A wintry Europe also brings to mind the destruction and devastation that a seemingly cold, relentless, unfeeling Europe has visited upon her own people and other societies around the globe.

Notwithstanding, in Europe the prodigal experiences some joys, like Ilse, whom he encountered in the Switzerland mountain town of Zermatt, and whose "hair above the crisp snow of table linen/ was like a flare, it led him, stumbling, inane;" and like the other "secular angels" in Venice, in Milan, "hardening that horn of ageing desire and its devastations." Still, the prodigal is a wanderer, a fugitive; his moments of pleasure are fleeting. He asked, "Again, how many farewells and greetings/ on cheeks that change their name, how many kisses/ near tinkling earrings that fade like carriage bells." In another place he said, "All these remembered women melt into one,/ when my small words, like sails, must leave their haven." Is it any wonder then that the prodigal sees this as his final wandering, his last book? One senses that he has gotten tired of it all, and he would like nothing better than to remain in one place and get some lasting rest.

Zermatt, Switzerland

The prodigal's journey is more thematic than geographic. The world of places and personalities that he encountered in books, paintings and history are given as much importance as those of real life. One conjures up the other and apparently in some instances, at least in his mind, they are the same. It is in books that the prodigal first encountered the world of his pilgrimage. The terror he experienced as he gazed over the Alps in the death-grip of winter was the same terror that "magnetized a child" from a reading of "Andersen's Ice Maiden and Whittier's Snow-Bound." According to the prodigal, he met "The Ice Maiden" of Andersen's book in the Alps. "I did not know then that/ she worked as a blond waitress in Zermatt." The mountains of Abruzzi made him recall the Abruzzi of Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms. In the lobby of a hotel in the Italian port city of Pescara, he was there reading a book on the life of Nora, James Joyce's wife, only to run into the actress whose picture was on the book's cover and who was playing the role of Nora in the film version of the book. So touched was the prodigal by this coincident that he thought of it as not only fated but as a miracle, an epiphany.

Leaving behind the Alps, Ilse, and the Ice Maiden waitress, and after brief stops in Geneva and the lake city of Lausanne, Switzerland, the prodigal enters Italy. It is an intoxicating Italy. "The bright air full of drunken insects." Beauty is everywhere—the "erect-flame cypresses," the olive groves, the castles, the "infantry of pines," the "serene soft mountains" of Abruzzi. "O it was lovely coming through the mountains." "The widening love of Italy growing stronger/ against my will with sunlight in Milan ..." But it seems of all Italy it is the Via Veneto, a district in the city of Venus, that the prodigal is most in love with.

I lived in two villages: Greenwich and Gros Ilet,
and loved both almost equally. One had the sea,
grey morning light along the waking water,
the other a great river, and if they asked
what country I was from I'd say, "The light
of that tree-lined sunrise down the Via Veneto.

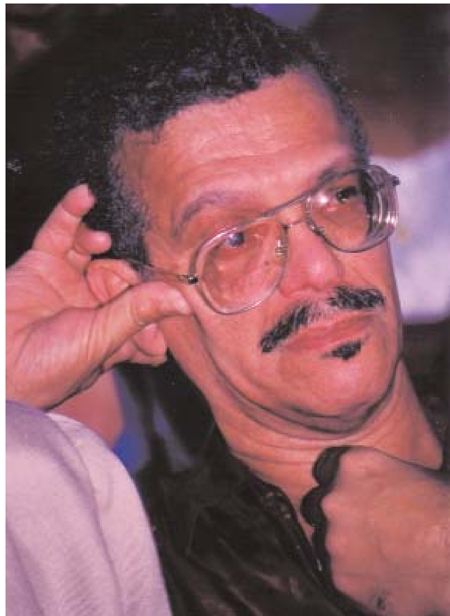
In Italy the prodigal visits another port city, Genoa, the birth place of Christopher Columbus. Of the Admiral he said, "O Genoan, I come as the last line of where you began." As was to be expected Genoa reminds the prodigal not only of the Discoverer (his statue was impossible to miss), but of the sad chapter—slavery, middle passage, human degradation—in the history of his people. "The port whose wharf holds long shadows and silence." "The caravel's sigh/ at the remorseful future that lay ahead." "The smell of history I carry in my clothes."

The same way that in the middle of the prodigal's terror and sadness he is able to find beauty and joy, in the middle of his intoxication there are sadness and devastation. As the prodigal feasted his eyes on the splendour of the Italian countryside, the fate of his twin brother, Roderick, suddenly surfaced, "Diabetic, dying, my double." In Pescara he met a beautiful but sad woman whose name was a "mountain flower's" and who told him that the Jews were to blame for the war in the Baltic. The atrocities, casualties, desolation, and dislocation of war, a much too often European occurrence, are brought into view. The words of the sad beauty also brought to light this European irrational compulsion of blaming the Jews for their problems and using that as an excuse to dispose of them, either through expulsion or worse through genocide as was the case in Hitler's Germany.

After Italy and the Baltics, the poet dwells on the attrocities of the Russian empire and World War II Germany, and the ease with which history can forgive and forget. Speaking of Germany, he said, “History is healing,/ and charity is its scar, its carapace.”

And of Russia and Eastern Europe, "History here is the covering-over of corpses,/ not only in trenches of quicklime, but also/ the dandruff of pigeon-drops in the stone-wigs of statues."

After Europe, The Prodigal jumps to Columbia. However, in sharp contrast to the white, dreary weather that the prodigal encountered when he first arrived in Europe, as if to mirror the passionate yet brutal history of Latin America, in Columbia he is caught in the heat and drought of midsummer. Accompanied by the Ambassador and his assistant, and plain clothes soldiers, we see the prodigal in a car departing the Columbian port city of Barranquilla, and heading for the walled (also a coastal) city of Cartagena. The military escort is a necessity because the country is plagued by ransom motivated kidnapping. Constanzia, the young beautiful sergeant with "olive-green uniform" covering a "plump and rounded body," is leading the way on a motorbike. She would represent yet another beauty with whom the prodigal had shared a moment of encounter. "Earlier,/ I had said goodbye to the beautiful plump soldier/ to the berry-red lipstick, goodbye to eyes/ that held, I hoped, more than formal affection,/ Desire flashed from my face/ like a weapon caught in sunlight." However, this encounter would end in the most dramatic fashion. The prodigal was soon to witness her death. "A shot rang out/ and the beautiful soldier lay/ on the dry grass verge staring at the blue sky."



Roderick Walcott

The shooting death of the young, beautiful soldier seemed to echo the history of Latin America with its legacy of bloody revolutions, of European rape and plunder, and suggests that the same was still going on. "Your country's discipline of sadness." Nonetheless the prodigal shares an affinity with this part of the world. Its rape and plunder were not unlike those visited on his homeland. Besides they shared the same Caribbean Sea. Of Barranquilla's Caribbean coast, he said, "Not a new coast, but home." Referring to Cartagena, which is also on the Caribbean Sea, he said, "Our sea's first city." And, "Not a strange coast, but home."

The death of Constanzia seemed also to serve as an omen of the death of Walcott's brother. In the following scene we find the poet lying on a bed in a hotel in Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city. It is a rest without peace, and a quiet without solace. But the oppressive summer heat is not the principal source of his unrest. It is here that the prodigal extensively mourns the passing of his brother.

... and between trees dotting the plain, fog,
thick as your clogged breath, ...
... I read this.
March 11. 8:35 a.m. Guadalajara, Saturday.
Roddy. Toronto. Cremated today.
The streets and trees of Mexico covered with ash.

Your soul, my twin, keeps fluttering in my head

Still in mourning, the poet asked, "What was our war, veteran of threescore years and ten?/ to save the salt light of the island/ to protect and exalt its small people."

Not surprisingly, his brother's sickness and then death made him painfully aware of his own mortality.

Gros Islet, St. Lucia

Greenwich Village, New York

Via Veneto, Venus

Threescore and ten plus one past our allotment,
in the morning mirror, the disassembled man.
And all the pieces that go to make me up—
the detached front tooth from a lower denture
the thick fog I cannot pierce without glasses
the shot of pain from a kidney
these piercings of acute mortality.

The Cost of Exile

Besides his brother's death, on this pilgrimage the prodigal comes face to face with a great dilemma that has plagued generations of West Indians and have been the wellspring of much Caribbean literature. Though of breathtaking beauty, the islands are tiny worlds of small-minded politicians, with populations often unappreciative of one's gift and more likely to discourage than encourage one's talent. The same islands that are

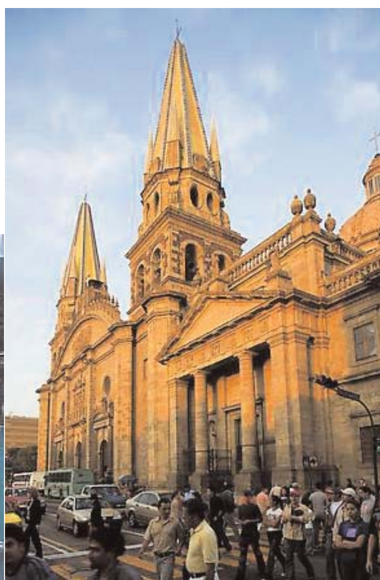
visitors' paradises, present one with little opportunity to realize one's artistic potential. So at that critical, youthful age when ambition is a flame as wide as the universe, the very mountains that give the islands their uniqueness and magnify their beauty may feel like a rope around one's neck. Under these conditions, it seems that the only way one can fulfill one's ambition, keep one's creative flame alive, or at the very least satisfy the youthful, burning desire to see the world, is to trade the land of one's birth for the great metropolises of the world.

This migration of West Indian writers is not without vindication. Most West Indian writers of note spent a significant part of their adult life outside the region. Indeed, it appears that they are at their most prolific while away from their homeland. "We read, we travel, we become," said the prodigal. On the other hand, many West Indians who showed great promise in their youth but never sought the opportunities of Europe or America, soon gave up their artistic life (at least they were not heard of after awhile) after their first few outpourings. It would appear that there is something stifling about these islands. There is talent. There is prodigious talent. Derek Walcott himself has attested to that. However, it seems after the initial flowering (probably because of a lack of nurturing and limited opportunities for artists to live by their art) frustration and despondency set in.

Regarding the vindication noted above, no greater example than Walcott exists. After all, he reached the summit of the artistic and intellectual world, one of only three West Indians to have done so. Interestingly enough all three spent a great deal of their productive lives outside the region.

However, as any economist will tell you, there is no free lunch and everything has a cost. What is the price West Indians have had to pay for the abandonment of their homeland and for the fulfilment of their artistic and career dreams? Well it turns out there is something about these mountains, seemingly rising out of the sea and perpetually embracing the land; these beaches of touristic delight; these patches of tropical profusion; these people of rainbow exuberance who can never refuse a stranger and who possess an appetite for life that belies the truth of their history, that keeps calling the sons and daughters of the soil, no matter the distance they have travelled, to come back home. "They are in the blood" says Walcott in Midsummer: LIV(1984). “The midsummer sea, the hot pitch road, this grass, these shacks that made me,/jungle and razor grass shimmering by the roadside, the edge of art;/wood lice are humming in the sacred wood,/nothing can burn them out, they are in the blood;”

Genoa, Italy



Guadalajara, Mexico

Cartagena, Columbia

At his New York apartment on the Hudson River the prodigal said of a ship that was leaving the river for the Caribbean, "Its cargo: my longing." Regardless the subject or setting of Walcott's poetry, one can always expect St. Lucia and the Caribbean to pop in for a visit. "They are in the blood."

What probably intensifies the longing and yearning for the same homeland West Indian expatriates had been so happy (and could not have waited) to vacate, is that partly because of the colour of their skin they could never become fully integrated in their adopted societies. Between the walls of the universities or the work place, among their colleagues, the West Indians by virtue of their astonishing achievements may be held in awe, but no sooner they step out into the general population, their complexion marks them for inferiority and second class citizenry. Probably, for this and other reasons, West Indians can never come to fully accept the people of the metropolises as their people, and their adopted homes as their country. Their people and country forever remain those they had left behind. Consequently, borrowing a phrase from V.S. Naipaul, “Half-a-Life” is what they are relegated to in these foreign countries.

The prodigal admits that his talent had brought him to Europe, but indeed it was a totally different place. "A conspiring pen/ had brought him thus far/ but this was a different climate,/ a different country." In another place he complains, "After the museums and the sunlit streets,/ in all that completion there is still an emptiness."

Yet the cost to our West Indian expatriates goes beyond yearning and alienation, because there is something about our culture and the way we are raised that make us never to forget our debt to our country. One would be hard pressed to find a St. Lucian who has recently travelled abroad to study whose stated ambition or mission is not to get an education and hurry home to contribute to their country. Of course, whether they do so or not is a different story altogether, but those who did not return would forever harbor guilt about having sold out, having betrayed the faith. This guilt may partly explain the generosity of Caribbean expatriates in sending money back home. Given the high ratio of the expatriate population to the population back home, these remittances are of such magnitude that they go a long way in keeping some of these economies afloat.

In that regard the prodigal is no different. In a moment of languor and guilt, he said, "My heart/ was available for a reasonable price." For selling his soul he pleaded, "Forgive us our treacheries, so lightly lost!"

Anse La Raye, St. Lucia

The prodigal's selling of himself to Europe is not a straightforward thing. It is a slow painful process. He asked should he give up Europe or at least give Europe the half of himself that belongs to it. "And Europe? / Surrender it as the waves render the idea/ of opera and the ochre walls of Parma;/ or let it claim what's half, at least, its own/ from illegitimate or legitimate blood."

How does the prodigal reconcile or make up for this the selling of his soul? It seems he has done so by putting his gift at the disposal of small inconsequential places, for example, the Caribbean islands, because though they are small insignificant places the essence of their existence are no different than that of Europe and the other places that speak of empires. Indeed, Walcott's poetry is one that has encompassed the world without ever losing sight of his homeland. "In your ambitious, pompous panel of a country fete,/ work on those minuscule extra figures. They too have lives/ those little figures, their separate narrative/ away from but parallel to the centre/ where the monumental clangour is in progress."

The prodigal seemed to have also made reconciliation by maintaining a sense of justice and honesty. "Saying to the sea and Europe, ‘Here I am,'/ division swayed by justice, poetry/ unbiased to an absolute pivot, that is my sword's/ surrendering victory over myself, my better halves."

The cost to the expatriates does not stop there. While away they seem to forget all the negatives of their homeland and reminisce on the good times they once had, and all the things they are missing. But when they return home, either for good or for an extended visit, it does not take long for them to awake to the limiting and oppressive nature of their homeland that had driven them away in the first place. Also the warmth and comfort of home that the expatriates had once enjoyed can never be fully recaptured. Not least because their outlook on life and mode of behaviour has changed—an "untethered pilgrimage" in which "what was altered was something more profound/ than geography, it was the self," says the prodigal—and culturally speaking their countrymen no longer see them as fully belonging. In other words, home may no longer be home. Also, coming to grips with the realities of their homeland, the expatiates may experience a bout of helplessness of being unable to help their people, yet this was one of their stated reasons for going abroad. Worse, it may soon dawn upon the expatriates that in truth they are more at home on foreign soil than they are at home. Expatriates would often admit that after getting use to the structured societies of the developed world, it is a bit unsettling returning to the seemingly structureless societies of the Caribbean. So homelessness represents yet another cost of the fulfilment of their ambitions.

Most of these sentiments surrounding the returning expatriates find expression in *Homecoming: Anse La Raye*, The Gulf and Other Poems (1969). In this poem Walcott said, "There are no rites/ for those who have returned." And, "Never guessed you'd come/ to know there are homecomings without home." This feeling of unwelcomeness is further compounded by the expatriates sense that he has done nothing to help his people. For example, in the same poem, referring to a group of children who because of his clothes and posture thought he was a tourist so came swarming in search of gifts, the poet said, "You gave them nothing/ Their curses melt in air/ The black cliffs scowl/ the ocean sucks its teeth/ like that dugout canoe." In *The Light of the World,* The Arkansas Testament (1987), the poet went further to say, “I had abandoned them.” And, “There was nothing they wanted, nothing I could give them/ but this thing I called ‘The Light of the World.’” The prodigal also alludes to this sense of homelessness. He said, "unreal in either world."

However, it would be misleading to suggest that prior to Walcott's travels he was well integrated in his society. Even from a reading of Walcott's own poetry one gets the impression he was somewhat apart, that in several different ways he grew up on the edges of St. Lucian society. To begin with he was from a Methodist family in an ocean of Roman Catholicism. At best he could only be an observer of Roman Catholic rites of passages such as First Communion that more than 95 percent of the pop-

The Pitons of St. Lucia are in the blood.

ulation participated in because more than 95 percent of the population was Roman Catholic. Second, Derek Walcott's mix of Scottish, Dutch and African parentage set him apart from the vast majority of St. Lucians. In his poetry, referencing his mixed ancestry he called himself a "divided child," a "shabine," a "red nigger." Consider, for example, `*The Schooner Flight*, from the The Star Apple Kingdom (1979). In it the Shabine (red nigger) character who takes flight from the Republic (Trinidad) on a schooner suggests that his complexion placed him at a certain discomfit in West Indian society.

I had no nation now but the imagination.
After the white man, the niggers didn't want me
when the power swing to their side.
The first chain my hands and apologize, "History";
The next said I wasn't black enough for their pride.

In another part of the poem, Shabine explained himself further.

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

This outsider status can be painful and lonely, but as an outsider one gets special vintage points, and one is forced to go internal, to search for answers of why one is different. However, it is this very outlook, this sense of imbalance—after all, art is a search for balance—this sense that something is missing, that becomes the raw material for writing, for art, for intellectualization. The habit of critical, honest, objective analysis that one develops from analyzing oneself is in turn applied to society overall. V.S. Niapaul is the consummate outsider. He is such an outsider that he seemed unreconciled with his own most common choice of artistic expression. He has hinted that the novel has no future, it will soon die, and his latest novel, Magic Seeds, will be his last. One of the reasons put forward for the Jews' disproportionate contribution to world intellectual output is that throughout most of their history they were strangers in other people's land, outsiders looking on. To a large extent, Derek Walcott's poetry, The Prodigal no exception, seems to be about reconciling the cross currents, the dividedness, in his life. Dividedness between his European and African ancestry, dividedness between English and his native creole language, dividedness between his love of the islands and his love of the great metropolises. This notion is most eloquently expressed in *A Far Cry from Africa,* from the collection, In A Green Light (1962).

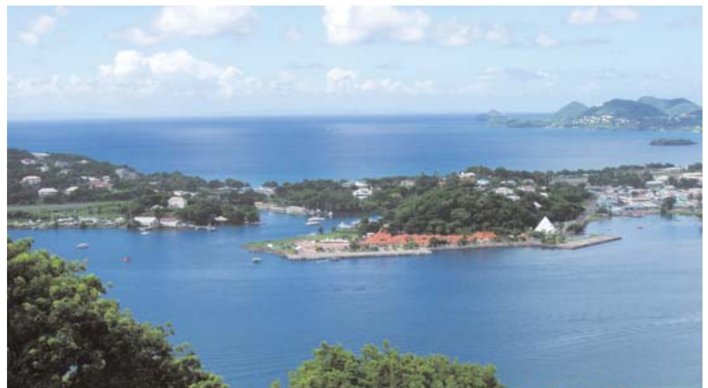
I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both , or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I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

And in The Prodigal: "And the cracked heart and the dividing mind/ yawn like a chasm, from too many fissures."

The Homecoming

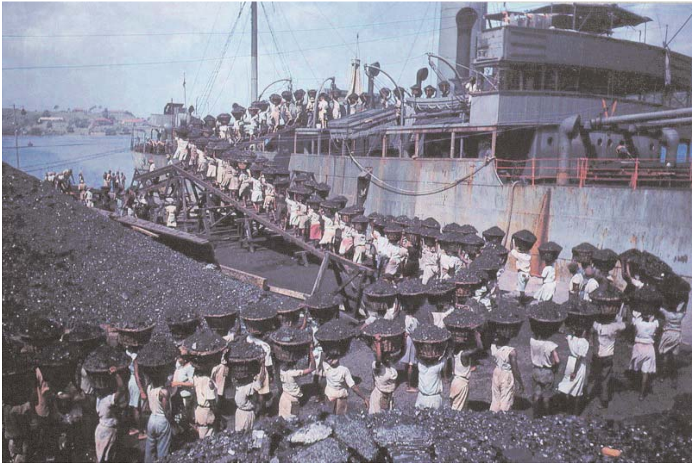
The prodigal arrives home in the middle of the lent season; the drought and miserly season. He has returned with foreign ways and thinking. "He had the smell of cities in his clothes,/ the steam and soot of trains of Fascist stations." Therefore, he is apprehensive that his countrymen will not recognize, much less acknowledge him. "The rock-brown dove had fluttered from that fear/ that what he loved and knew once as a boy/ would panic and forget him from the change/ of character that the grunting swine could smell." Thus the prodigal is much relieved when even the most common of his people acknowledges him. "A sow and her litter. Acknowledged prodigal."

When the rains came the poet is elated. "I had forgotten the benediction of rain/ edged with sunlight, the prayers of dripping leaves/ And I have nothing more/ to write about than gratitude. For *la mer*,/ soleil-là, the bow of the arc-en-ciel/ and the archery of blackbirds from its/ radiant bow." In another verse, "There was a beautiful rain this morning," he pronounced. So not only was the poet acknowledged and welcomed by his people, but he received a cleansing, a rebirth, showers of blessing. But as always his blessings are mixed. The rain reminded him of his brother and many of his friends who were no longer among the living. "There were so many names the rain recited:/ Alan, Joseph and Claude and Charles and Rody." Then quoting Edward Thomas, he said, "Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon."


Castries' surrounding waters

The prodigal is preoccupied with other thoughts that go to the very heart of the nature of our existence, of who we are. One such preoccupation is that one of the effects of visiting the "big countries," the great metropolises of the world with their long legacy of recorded history is to make us painfully aware of how small and inconsequential is our homeland. Compared to these "big countries" our islands are mere pebbles decorating the beachfront. This begs the question of what to make of that? Should we all migrate out of these islands? Should we abandon our way of life for that of these metropolises? Should we accept inferiority and be contented that this is the nature of things?

Apparently after much mental oscillation the prodigal has found some answers. He seems to be saying stop torturing ourselves with these comparisons. They are meaningless. Stop concerning ourselves with the "conflicts of origins," which side of our ancestry (Asian, African, European) is most legitimate, which side is superior. For that is of no value. Accept ourselves as we are, as we have become. One branch of our ancestry is no



The Charboniers

less than the other.

> *... There in that hall*
> *among those porcelain-pink and dour burghers*
> *was an illegitimate ancestor, as equal*
> *as the African fishing through tall river-reeds*
> *to pierce you, threshing on his stick.*

We are what we are, whatever that is. Size is not an indication of superiority. Monuments, statues, sky-touching cathedrals, trains, great libraries, do not form the essence of humanity. To the extent that all human beings are trying to solve the same riddle of life, and no society has gotten closer to the answer than any other, all are equal. Better yet, take a page from our hills, and our flora and fauna and make no comparisons and ascribe no imagined values to what you see.

> *... there is nothing imperial*
> *in our plumes ...*
> *... we have*
> *no envy of the white mountains, or of the white horn*
> *above the smothered inns, no envy of the olive*
> *or redoubtable oaks. We were never emblems.*
> *The dawn would be fresh, the morning bliss,*
> *if the light would break on your glaucous eyes*
> *to see us without a simile, not just the green world*
> *or streams where the pebbles are parables*

In Piaille (possibly Piaye, in the district of Choiseul) the prodigal witnessed what seemed to be a Kele Rite celebration that reminded him of death, which has become all too common for him. The celebration also made him recall Africa and the island's slavery past. However, probably because he has spent too much time abroad and/or because of his mixed heritage the prodigal feels disconnected, alienated from this part of his culture. "Your pale feet cannot keep time/ feel no communion with its celebrants,/ they keep another time, the time you keep/ comes with a different metre." This no doubt represents yet another cost of exile.

Throughout the book, including his homecoming, the prodigal contemplates the inevitability of old age and death. "Do you think Time makes exceptions, do you think/ Death mutters, ‘Maybe I'll skip this one'?" Apart from physical decline, one problem the prodigal has with getting old is that it brings to sharp focus both the imminence of death and all the things that would be left undone. All the great novels he had wished to read that would remain unread, all the books he had wished to write that would remain unwritten, all the journeys he wished to go on that would remain untravelled.

Still, the prodigal admits that old age is not all bad. At his ripe age he was no longer consumed by ambition, for he had long become whatever or whomever he was going to be. "I look and no longer sigh for the impossible." His craft had long arrived at the level it was ever going to reach. Indeed, time has passed him by. Since he need no longer worry about where his craft was headed, or the fulfilment of his ambitions or the fear of not realizing his potential, he has at last found peace, and he now takes delight in just being whatever he is, even if what is, is dated or may be even irrelevant. "I sipped the long delight of a past time/ where ambition was too late. My craft was stuck./ My deep delight lay in being dated/ like the archaic engine. Peace was immense."

Moreover, the poet admonishes himself that instead of complaining he should be counting his blessings that he still has all his faculties about him and that his crafts (painting, poetry, playwright) still presented him with challenges and therefore were still worth doing. "Be happy; you're writing from the privilege/ of all your wits about you in your old age,/ be grateful that each craft stays hard to do."

Also, at this ripe age the poet has gotten a second lease on life. Thanks to his homeland he is seeing things afresh. "My eyes are washed clean in the sea-wind, I feel/ brightness and sweet alarm, the widened pupils/ of the freshly familiar, things that have not moved/ since childhood, nouns that have stayed/ to keep me company in my old age."

Another facet of the poets mature age is that at this stage in his life his legacy is probably more important to him than what is going on now. For it is an age where one reflects back and wonders what was it all about? What was accomplished and to what purpose? Was it all worth it? Did one get it right? If one had to do it over, what would one change? "Prodigal, what were your wanderings about?" Asked the poet. "Were your life and work/ simply a good translation?" "And have I looked at life, in other words,/ through some inoperable cataract?"

Referring to a St. Lucian fishing village with "its rags of shadow," the "reek from its drains," its "rum-raddled fishermen," and with a fish market teeming with flies, the poet asked, "What did you swear to uphold? This filth?/ Or the aria that soars like a banner from its gates?"

The poet had promised to uphold the faith, "swearing not to leave them/ for real principalities in Berlin or Milan." Several decades before, in Another Life, speaking of himself and the painter, Dustan St. Omer, he wrote:

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

But ironically the very craft that he had planned to put at the

disposal of his people, as it gained celebrity status, was what led him to betray the faith. "But my craft's irony was in betrayal,/ it widened reputation and shrank the archipelago/ to stepping stones." From such lines, one gets the feeling that even at the end of his wanderings, the poet still has mixed feelings about the value of his contributions. He is still in doubt about whether he had gotten it right.

As discussed above and as revealed in much of Walcott's poetry, the poet is very much divided between Europe and St. Lucia. Nevertheless, in The Prodigal, towards the end, the poet makes it clear what his choice would be if forced to choose. And given that there is something, though undescribable, about this tiny place of ours that will always pull us towards it, it is not too difficult to decipher what that choice would be. "He feels the humming that goes on in the tired heart/ once you are home."

However, it is no easy feat for the poet to surrender Europe. After all, he has gotten used to Europe, Europe has become part of him, he has some of Europe inside him. Of the cities of Italy, he said, "So an adopted city slides into me,/ till my gestures echo those of its citizens,/ and my shoes that slide over a sidewalk grating/ move without fear of falling, move as if rooted/ in the metre of memory." But, not only that. The poet cannot stop marvelling at Europe. " I have seen Venice trembling in the sun,/ shadow-shawled Granada and the cork groves of Spain,/ across the coined Thames, the grey light of London,/ the drizzles sweeping Pescara's esplanade/ and stone dolphins circling the basin of a fountain."

And it isn't that the poet has illusions about his homeland, because in certain respects he sees it as of no comparison to Europe. "Compare Milan, compare a glimpse of the Arno,/ with this river-bed congealed with rubbish." Yet, the poet's choice is clear. "But, on the sloping pastures behind Gros Piton,/ in the monumental shadow of that lilac mountain,/ I have seen the terrestrial paradise."

Watching a "twin-sailed shallop rounding Pigeon island" the poet declared, "This line is my horizon./ I cannot be happier than this."

In another place he said, "This bedraggled backyard, this unfulfilled lot,/ this little field of leaves, brittle and fallen,/ of all the cities of the world, this is your centre."

Part of the reason for this loyalty to St. Lucia, the poet seems to be saying, is that the land speaks of his ancestors, the Neg Marons of St. Lucian history. "What a great gulf/ of loyalty of inheritance comes from that fact—/ that these are your ancestors, not the cloaked pilgrims/ of the one time in aureate Venice."

The Prodigal ends with the poet on a boat taking him on a dolphin-watching trip in St. Lucian waters. The further behind the boat leaves shore the more apprehensive the poet becomes of his safety. Besides, in his old age he no longer believes in myths or legends, not least the myth (as he sees it) of the existence of the dolphins. But there, when least expecting, were the dolphins joyfully leaping into air and plunging into the sea. The poet is thrilled. The unbelievable has manifested right in front of his eyes. His faith is restored. "I would not have believed in them, being too old/ and sceptical from the fury of one life's/ determined benedictions, but they are here./ Angels and dolphins. The second, first."

But this was not the first time that dolphins had brought the poet hope. In a different part of the world, in Alpine waters, the sight of dolphins at play had helped him reconciled the death of his brother. "And those finished hopes/ that I would see you again, my twin, 'my dolphin.'/ And yet elation drove the dolphins' course/ as if both from and to you, their joy was ours."

The Deseasonalization of Derek Walcott

Reading Walcott is like taking a lesson in world history, literature, art, and geography, all in one. A lesson in St. Lucian, Caribbean, and world Culture, all encompassing. Depth without bottom and breadth without horizons. It is hard to decide which is more beautiful, a Walcott verse describing the beauty of a visage or the visage itself.

Reading Walcott is like listening to music, though sometimes the lyrics are in a foreign language, but the rhythm, harmony and melody matchless.

Each year St. Lucia celebrates Walcott as part of its Nobel Laureate festivities. However, few of Walcott's countrymen read his work. If some of those who have undergraduate and graduate degrees in literature-related fields and who themselves are cultural activists complain that they do not read much Walcott

It's bacchanal season

because he is too difficult to read, imagine how much less those who are not as equipped are reading Walcott's works. In fact, because of its theatre tradition, St. Lucia has a much greater exposure to Walcott's plays than to his poetry.

I have often marvelled at how lucky St. Lucia is to have one of the best poets of his time (and maybe one of the best poets of all time) devoting such a significant portion of his work to giving voice to only 160 thousand voices. Clearly, this is as unprecedented in history as Walcott's poetry itself, and as such a small place giving rise to such a giant.

During all of my growing up, I never knew about the charboniers (women coal carriers), and that port Castries was a major Caribbean coaling station. Well into adult life, it was in Walcott's poetry I first found out. From one line of one of his poems (along with my knowledge of the women banana carriers) I was able to visualize the coal loading operations of the charboniers and write a passage in my novel, Death by Fire, capturing the phenomenon. Years later, I came upon a photo of the charboniers in action and

to my amazement my description matched the photo almost exactly. Such is the power of a Walcott verse. What better description exist of the 1948 Castries fire than Derek Walcott's *A City's Death by Fire*. I can go on and on about the many gems I have unearthed in Walcott's work, but I think my message is clear. I just wish more St. Lucians would read Derek Walcott and allow themselves the opportunity of discovering these gems and the many others begging to be found.

In his poetry Derek Walcott often speaks about how his encounter with Europe or America fills him with the sense of how insignificant and marginal is his homeland. But in my mind we have Derek Walcott, and he is the great equalizer.

I have a friend who often repeats that we should forget science because we cannot compete with Europe and America on that basis, but we can definitely compete based on culture. Therefore, we should focus our energies on the creation of cultural products. Of course, I do not agree that we should focus on culture at the exclusion of science, but my friend is correct. We seem to be more competitive, we have made a greater mark, in culture.

It is ironic that although Walcott often speaks about St. Lucia as a place without seasons, "how it is steady and season less in these islands," his country appears to have an obsession for seasons, for seasonalizing activities. We have the nationalism and patriotic season (February), the Jazz and music season (first two weeks in May), the reading season (May), the bacchanal season (June-July), the history and emancipation season (August), the Kwéyòl and culture season (October), the Christmas season (December), and the Derek Walcott / Arthur Lewis or Nobel Laureate season (January). No sooner a season is over, the persons, activities, practices or consciousness associated with that season are quickly abandoned until next season. I would like to see Walcott deseasonalized and a course taught in secondary schools called, say, the literature of Derek Walcott, or the Life and work of our Nobel Laureates.

I think this will make the great man happy. He has intimated that though he does not mind all the attention and fanfare he is receiving from his country (of course this happens only in the month of his season, otherwise he is ignored) he thinks it is a bit misplaced. He would have liked some more attention devoted to the development of artists, both in terms of giving them scholarships and providing them proper facilities (theatre houses, for example) to practise their craft. To this I am sure he would add that the greatest honour his country folk can bestow on him is for them to read, discuss, and critique his work, instead of leaving all that to Europeans and Americans, who then come down and tell us how great he is, causing us to celebrate him (in his season) even more intensely, though with limited appreciation or understanding of what constitutes his greatness. By paying greater attention to the poet's work we will help him answer his own question: "Prodigal, what were your wanderings about?" We would enable him to confidently say that what he had "swear to uphold" (and which he did uphold) was not the " filth" of his village drains but the "aria that soars like a banner from its gates."

Barbra Cadette in the jazz season

HOLOGRAM

(for Luke & Barbara Salisbury)

After the roll & tumble, we may find a startling
company of grandfathers: long obscure poems loaded with secret
perfections, put away for the quiet retreat of returned prodigals;
muttering lyrics, once rejected, hold freedoms that we've twisted
our lives all out of shape to find.

Poems are like children. Conceived in mystery,
our minds lost in strange passions, they arrive
to be fussed over, pinched, hugged and worried;
dressed up, dressed down, straightened out, set clear
on ways of speaking (they'll bear their own

subtleties & indiscretions, make their own intrigues, stir gossip);
we compare them to others' children, are aggressive
for their success, fear namelessness in their failure,
excuse all weaknesses, despair over their future,
humiliate ourselves to get them good recommendations.

Then, we fight to let them go, fall where they may,
make their way, shape their world, talk their
jargon, hope they'll be found honest. It is certain
that life's not an open book: the plainest face withholds
founts of sly metaphor & all sorts of reversing symbol.

Fathers, sheltering stones that revolve in our ancient bones,
may they make true friends, as I have.
I commit you to the future with prayers,
my children, my poems, my friends.

—John Robert Lee