

## Derek Walcott, Man of Faith

Poetry, in its best sense, resembles prayer. Also, at its best, it is like ordinary speech, in intention and expression. When I told him here at Medgar Evers three years ago, of my friend Harry's search to find people to share the news of his (Walcott) receiving the Nobel, Derek shared his own experience of the day he was honored in his native St. Lucia. He approached a man on a bicycle who was outside the church where the celebration was being held. Feigning ignorance, he asked the man what was the occasion for all the joyous sounds coming from inside the building, all the crowd. The man answered, "I don't know, but I happy!"

This is a true reflection of Walcott's relation to the people of his island, and to the Caribbean: a trust that intuitively, instinctively, they knew when something good concerning their lives was happening. That appreciation was enough of a reward for the poet. He trusted it more, perhaps, than the praises from those who were better educated, his effort being always to promote the language of verse as communication on the most visceral level, as ordinary speech. It's on this level, after all, that it tends to be its most inventive, its most theatrical, finding metaphors at every turn, in every corner of the eye and yard, under every stone, in the million grains of sand on the beach, and of course, in the sea, the endless coming and going of waves, true to every island.

This is the landscape that Derek raided time and again for the incredible imagery that is the hallmark of the Walcott poem- one line of surf writing sentences upon the sand, the next erasing it, as a magical thing you must catch quickly, in the way that all magical moments of life are fleeting; the stalks of flowers he describes as lining the valley in Santa Cruz, the way they opened at the ends of lances, the way they nodded under the pelting rain. These are the backgrounds against which the citizens act out their lives. He called Belmont "the city of tailors, endlessly stitching June and July together." In his great essay, *What The Twilight Says*, he describes the theater of daily living, recounting the activities of the people, pushing them to realize the gift of finding themselves in a place where they could start from scratch, despite the horrific legacy of slavery, of the middle passage, to recognize that to have nothing, is to have everything, to be Crusoe, to look around at the wonders inland from these beaches. My friend Lance asked his mother one day when he was feeling low, "Ma, what is a poor man's chance?" She responded, "All in the world, son, all in the world."

Walcott was so taken by the nature of his people, according to his partner Sigrid, he often worried that perhaps he didn't pay enough attention to their hardships, their troubles. But in poems like *The Saddhu of Couva*, made into a short film, Walcott shows how the old ways and customs must give way to new. It presents the pain and beauty that is the ironic truth of life and poetry. "Suppose all the gods are too old. There are no more elders, only old people. Suppose all the gods were killed by electric light." I am reminded of Brother Marvin's wonderful calypso, Brotherhood of the Boat- "There is no more Mother Africa no more Mother India, just Mother Trini." In our longing for things of the past, we might miss the opportunities of the present. In his poem The Knife of Dawn, Guyanese Martin Carter says, "I make my dance right here! We who are sweepers of an ancient sky, discovers of new planets, sudden stars/ we are the world's hope." When VS Naipaul asks, negatively, "Where are your monuments, your battles, your martyrs?" Walcott answers, in *The Sea Is History*, "Bone soldered by coral to bone, mosaics mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow."

I asked the question of Derek, "As the world changes, what is to keep the mortar that is the verb on the page from crumbling? Will the parentheses hold? What, when there is a dearth of trees, like in Haiti? When the backhoe rerouting the river destroys the turtles' habitat? When the sea itself is encroaching, so the lighthouse that was once here, is now out there? And his poem Forest of Europe, dedicated to his friend Joseph Brodsky in the book *The Arkansas Testament*, answers, "What's poetry if it's worth its salt/ but a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth/ the bread that lasts when systems have decayed."

During his lifetime, Walcott absorbed the landscape wherever he went, took it in through his eyes, his ears, his pores, and spit it out, through a craft he spent a lifetime perfecting, in cadence so sculpted you often didn't realize the impeccable rhyme, so we have a world preserved even when this tree or that river is lost through neglect or corruption, we have this gift to pass on, to be eternally grateful for.

*Mervyn Taylor*

*6/1/17*