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"IN GOD WE TROUST" Derek Walcott and God

by Fred D'Aguiar

"Do you believe in God?" I remember the interviewer in the company of another poet and me, asking Derek Walcott in the summer of 1986 at a BBC 2 Arena Caribbean Nights recording on the culture and arts of the Caribbean.¹ Derek Walcott paused for a moment and replied, "Only if God gets me another poem." Laughter erupted and with it a nod of recognition toward the contract with productivity every poet is sworn to at almost Mephistolian cost; laughter and a comic end to a serious subject. The idea of a poet selling a loved one for the price of a poem is not new. What is new or sounds like a new spin on an old thread is Derek Walcott's idea that the poem itself, namely poetics and poetry as a process, may contain God, indemnify spirituality, and enshrine faith in the middle of an absence of any obvious belief system, by investing in a formal procedure called the composed poem. If this is the case then the evidence should reside in the body of work. Nuggets of wisdom to do with a religious subject should be extractable from the work where the work functions as a surrogate cathedral for a missing conventional God worshipped in a conventional way.

As early as 1948 in "A City's Death by Fire" a poem preserved in his *Collected Poems*, Derek Walcott expresses a reverence for the trappings of the church that borders on religious conversion.

A City's Death by Fire

After that hot gossamer had leveled all but the church'd sky,
I wrote the tale by tallow of a city's death by fire;
Under a candle's eye, that smoked in tears, I
Wanted to tell, in more than wax, of faiths that were snapped like wire.
All day I walked abroad among the rubble'd tales,
Shocked at each wall that stood on the street like a liar;
Loud was the bird-rocked sky, and all the clouds were bales
Torn open by looting, and white, in spite of the fire.
By the smoking sea, where Christ walked, I asked, why
Should a man wax tears, when his wooden world fails?
In town, leaves were paper, but the hills were a flock of faiths;

To a boy who walked all day, each leaf was a green breath
 Rebuilding a love I thought was dead as nails,
 Blessing the death and the baptism by fire. (*Collected Poems* 6)

A religious vocabulary deployed at landscape, presented here as a cathedral, provides the poem's momentum. The poet ministers through song in a priestly way but without sermonizing. Philosophical enquiry works as gospel, rather than any declaration of faith or conventional belief. The presiding spirit is more Dylan Thomas than Christ. As a result, the benediction (a favorite word in the poet's lexicon) privileges art more than the life the art dramatizes. God is present in what people do, in their patterns of behavior but God is absent in the behavior of the poet: there isn't a God as a given entity or assumed presence in the poet's procedure of writing the poem, although the language of God provides a vocabulary for the poet. This steers the reader toward the poetry as art and artifice, especially in the poem's metaphorical transformation of the ravaged city. The material reality of the city while reduced to ashes by the fire gives rise to the Phoenix of spiritual awakening. What the art achieves in the early poem is a sort of spiritual elation, and a peace in lieu of understanding but without the religious conversion of being saved, more like a drowning for the poet. The poem as a procedure carries with it a religiosity of a kind easily mistaken for faith in a conventional God. But it is more akin to the poet's identification with a literary tradition with Christianity as one of its cornerstones than any alignment with faith. A desecrated landscape becomes a shared terrain between this Christian frame and the formal devices of the poem engaged in a joint effort that utilizes the trappings of Christian iconography to shake off its influence. The poem's success is gauged by the tone of the address. A poem's tone is a property of the poet buried in the poet's architecture. Tone is tantamount to a point of view and an opinion held by the poet² and not necessary for the poem's success but which forms part of the poem's overall impact on the reader. Tone, as it stands in this early poem, expresses a need for a deeper meaning in existence beyond the physical and material facts of life. If progress could be measured in this lyric moment, outside of narrative time in its instantaneous marshalling of impulses, then it would move from a religious starting point and head toward the secular, not in a straight narrative line, but in its circuitous tonal progression (rather like this sentence!), its sense of shaking off religious influence for some quality to do with the formal rewards of the sonnet. The sonnet rebuilds the city destroyed by fire with a poetic structure that owes much of its form to an infusion of spiritual thought. Here Walcott functions as spiritual architect. His tone includes an expression of grief over the destruction of the city. The poem's double procedure is that it grieves for the perished city, while, simultaneously, it builds an alternate and imperishable edifice in the substitute form of a sonnet. This formal device shadows a religious experience and can easily be mistaken for one.

Both poem and religion promise knowledge beyond the known world. The religious promise is life after death. For the poem the buried meanings resonate far beyond the surface meanings of the words. Both arts (if I may so address religious belief) invest in a faith in the process: for religion it is worship, for poetry it is poetic practice. Doubt appears to govern both processes. A central tenet of religion—faith—

circles the idea of doubt where doubt stars as the brink of faith before faith reasserts itself and casts off doubt. In the crucifixion, even if treated minimally as a parable, there is Christ in his supreme sacrifice on the cross wondering if God has forsaken him. In poetry doubt is necessary for poetic production. The poet doubts she or he is any good until the next poem and then doubts the worth of the thing and then writes another poem just to be sure, just because there is nothing else to be done and out of a compulsion for utterance and in service to the process infected with doubt but resplendent in its routine of faithful repetition and life-affirming practice.

Landscape replaces the church and becomes for Derek Walcott a character, not a holy spirit, but flesh invested with spirituality, and that is how it earns his devotion. History relays story for the poet and as such history (with a degree of myth thrown into the mix) replaces the religious fable. Not a bad start for a young poet on an intuitive quest of understanding of his art and craft.

Derek Walcott's Methodist upbringing in St. Lucia placed him in a religious minority in a Catholic majority nation.³ His Catholic schooling and veneration of his Irish Jesuit schoolmasters imbued him with an intuitive logic governed by religious praxis. But so did his use of English in a French Creole nation and his mixed-race background in a black majority country. Doubles typify his life and his search for a distance from each of them as he took what he could use from all of them. The experience made distancing into an art form for Derek Walcott at an early age. This formative experience planted a dichotomy in outlook that would constitute a challenge for the poet, namely, how to break out of a predictable binary dynamic way of thinking into more fruitful imaginative terrain.

In addition to his poetry Derek Walcott paints and tries to address painting as another expression of this spiritual quest. What seems to be behind both painting and poetry is a sensory frame at least as a starting off point, largely invested in narrative but not wholly so, which then spirals out into thoughts suggested by images and phrases as a method of moving from one line to another. This formal rigor resembles the trials of the Stations of the Cross, but only in its requirement of formalized difficulty as a necessary impediment before transcendence.

This formal rigor makes 1987 seem like a long way from 1948, but not really, if a reader subscribes to the notion of the poet as born not made ("born big so" as the Creole parlance would have it). Not just a struggle with craft but a struggle with place traps the poet in the poem, "The Light of the World." Strategically placed two thirds of the way into the "Here," first section of *The Arkansas Testament*, both a struggle with notions of craft and a wrestle with the idea of belonging to a place preoccupy the poet. The poem is a bus journey with the ordinary folk and the isolated poet ruminating on his place among them and what his art can offer them. Bob Marley, an artist like the poet, but one who has made it among the populous, frames the contemplative act by the poet. Marley is accepted among them, so why not the poet, the poem appears to ask the reader and the answer is an odd give and take of rejection and quiet acceptance, studied distance and guarded familiarity. The poet's desire for a woman provides an engine of sorts for the poet in his body. Art, in other words, if it is worth anything believes in the sensory as a gateway to the spiritual. In similar terms the woman the poet admires in the poem for her ordinary ripe flesh condition (as the

ready-to-eat fruit analogy would have it) becomes transformed by that process of seeing, that particular metaphorical and transmogrifying lens, into a goddess. The poet sings her a hymn of his lust and in exchange her humble standing, plain but young, elevates to heraldic status. This transformative aspect of Derek Walcott's poetry with lust or desire as a springboard, Marley's "got to have kaya now" (an epigraph for the poem), serves as sex subordinated, desire deferred to the higher calling of poetry, and takes the poet into the realm of a process of thought and conjecture that easily trumps desire and grows to be an act of sublimated desire. The title of the poem⁴ confers onto the people a humble gift—the transmutation of biography into art—that transforms their lives and opens a contemplative space that their busy routines appear not to make an allowance for. This twofold artistic benefit—a chronicling art and a transformative one—is bequeathed by the poet to the community that made him, or at least nurtured him, but one he is now distanced from to the point of silence and a near-voyeur's distance at that. It should be said that the poet is moved to tears by his yearning and his isolation, his love of the people and his loss of familial contact with them.

There is a cost to the poet for his artistic privilege and practice of artistic license. Life appears to be busily unfolding around him and he is seconded to it as a chronicler of events to do with it and as its philosopher. While he extracts pithy insights extrapolated from the situation of his body plunged into the environment, he remains mentally apart from it. The transport turns out to be wholly the poet's, his elevation of his surroundings from the quotidian to the heraldic plane. There is a concomitant teleportation of sorts involved whereby the ordinary and mundane give rise to the poetic and regal. That lust is transformed to desire and then metamorphosed once again into love results in a triple-layered unfolding of the poet's consciousness.

Another concern of the poem is framed by a woman vendor who wishes to board the bus and asks the driver in St. Lucian patois "*Pas quittez moi à terre.*" Walcott, in an almost DJ-inspired riff of verbal twists and turns by association of sound and meaning, runs with this for a few lines (in an artistic alignment of his prodigious gifts with Marley's):

"which is, in her patios: "Don't leave me stranded,"
 which is, in her history and that of her people:
 "Don't leave me on earth," or, by a shift of stress:
 "Don't leave me the earth" [for an inheritance];
 "Pas quittez moi à terre, Heavenly transport,
 Don't leave me on earth, I've had enough of it."
 The bus filled in the dark with heavy shadows
 that would not be left on earth; no, that would be left
 on the earth, and would have to make out.
 Abandonment was something they had grown used to."
 ("Arkansas Testament," 49-50)

His lines hanker toward alexandrines but fall into a loose, because conversational, iambic hiatus typical of blank verse in general but idiosyncratic to Derek Walcott in

particular in his mix of Standard English and French patwa⁵ (with some English Creole) registers. That last line is at least double edged: a religious abandonment coupled to that of politics, nothing new about that twin configuration, but with a second betrayal on the part of the poet who is clearly concerned with the ways his calling as a poet leaves these people behind (those ordinary folk who are not passengers on his form of transport, so to speak) even as he seeks to sustain his vital creative links with them. Ironically, this is a success for the poet. He succeeds in devoting a poem about sex and desire to the ordinary subject, the common folk, who represent a yearning in him for acceptance among them. Their oblivious sense of getting on with life contrasts with his immobility in the face of overwhelming sensation. They occupy the poem just when the poem feels least in communion with them, as if to testify against his fears by invading his art. A potential religious frame is blown away for its profane alternative, not the Holy Spirit but common flesh takes care of this light, not the scripture of an all-powerful consciousness but the poetry generated by humble and vulnerable and culpable flesh and blood.

The senior Walcott resembles the young poetic novice and the middle-aged seer in terms of this toying with a Christian tradition in an effort to reach beyond it to poetry's secular, formal, and gravityless space. That space resides in the formal range of Derek Walcott's poems rather than as a statement of intent. God is not jettisoned so much as seen to have a built-in obsolescence as far as the craft of the art is concerned. At some point in the poem, once it progresses away from its originating impulses (say, in *Tiepolo's Hound*, which has many starts and stops into the Caribbean and Parisian life of Pissarro but then quickly settles into a contemplation about the rewards of artistic endeavor⁶). The delight resides in the local surprises to do with Derek Walcott's demonstration of a formal dexterity in and of itself rather than its being pressed into the service of any creed. He reconciles two art forms, painting and poetry. He examines his lifelong and double devotion as painter and poet to the two art forms as an artistic figure made in the Caribbean but mired in a Western Christian literary tradition by latching onto a precursor from the nineteenth century, the painter Pissarro.

The Bounty is not God but the manifestations of life on earth and the art of poetry, which seeks to articulate the character of that bounty, what Derek Walcott calls "the awe in the ordinary" (*The Bounty*, p.7 iii).⁷ Derek Walcott as bounty hunter uses the bounty of his art and craft to understand nature's bounty. From one bounty, poetry, to another bounty, nature, Walcott devises the procedure that it takes a bounty to know a bounty. This declaration aligns him with the romantic tradition that saw reasons for religious belief in the obvious evidence of nature, or at least a redress between humanity's belief in its own superiority over nature and nature's self-evident magnificence.⁸ But rather than the romance of Wordsworth to guide him, Walcott opts for a riskier spiritual precursor, in the person of John Clare. Mad John Clare throws into relief Walcott's own measured grief-ridden tones. Where Clare is mad, Walcott is sad. Walcott mourns his dead mother, "the rose of my life" (*The Bounty* 15), as though nature's reclamation of her body imbued all of nature with the love once associated with her body while she lived. But loss itself takes center stage rather than the character of his mother, which says more about the disparity between

Clare and Walcott as Walcott positions himself in the poetic tradition than about a requiem for his mother; or put another way, both qualities, grief and loss, belong to the poem but in unequal measures that favor the mood of grief over the loss of the mother.

John Clare cuts a pitiful figure in the world of poetry not least because he died relatively young, incredibly poor, and in relative obscurity. The cost of a poetic consciousness out of sync with nature or driven mad by nature's bounty when it should have been in league with that largesse, qualifies Walcott's engagement with nature. Walcott's poetic consciousness is at least historical, whereas Clare's was most palpably not. Walcott understands Clare's sacrifice for the greater calling of art as too much of a cost to pay or cross to bear, and he qualifies his engagement as grief not rage, a mourning elegiac stance rather than any combative outlook. Nature is not out to defeat the poet, but must be a resource. Clare's recognition of a peace in death, after the fact of a life dedicated to poetry and the study of nature "the grass below—above the vaulted sky"⁹ comes far too late for Walcott and it is swapped by Walcott for a communion between nature and the art of poetry. Whereas Clare went mad in his quest, Derek Walcott calls for repose in nature, a version, if ever there was one, of that line from Clare. But God is nowhere to be found, though, as in the earliest of Derek Walcott's poetry, the poetics is replete with the vocabulary of the church and therefore coterminous with a spiritual quest. Spirituality is supplied not by worship in a church but by poetic practice devoted to the study of nature. This places Walcott firmly in a romantic tradition with the obvious proviso of his historical consciousness as a necessary qualification of his engagement with Europe.

In God We Troust, the name and motto on the new boat or craft of Achille in *Omeros*, says much about the quality of this historical consciousness as it rubs up against notions of religious belief. The transfigured Greek hero in his commonplace Caribbean island backdrop is part of this elegy to the ordinary or the ordinary as imbued with the heroic. Myth is in cahoots with history—Greek myth meets an African and New World history. The misspelling, which Achille insists on keeping in obedience to his twin language loyalties (to French and English, patios and Creole), subverts the passive noun, trust, from the vessel in which the faithful place their faith to the much more troublesome verb equivalent and suggests a sort of quest or enquiry, or the continuous action of "throstle," and implies some as yet to be resolved relationship and search in the coalition between the divine spirit and human culpability. As Achille says to the priest who smiles at the name when he blesses the fishing boat, "Leave it! Is God's spelling and mine" (p 8).

The altered terms of engagement of high religion when embraced by the commoner equals the misspelling and required adjustment religion makes to survive as faith in a new setting. A similar adjustment is made to the spiritual quest retooled by the poetry kit: for God read poem.

I do not wish to argue that Derek Walcott is bigger than God but more to mean that poetry creates a secular space that replaces God. Poetry as a lifelong devotion takes the place of worship, and, at the expense of religion, poetry becomes the vessel for spiritual quest and fulfillment. More to the point, the formal devices of a poem carry with it inherent spiritual rewards, a deep confirmation of the sensuous life, and

metaphorical contemplation as an end rather than a means. Reading Derek Walcott's lush rendition of this conjured spiritual space—its sheer metaphorical breadth and depth of tone—leaves me entirely convinced about the alternative religious truth in the claims made on his imagination by the Caribbean visual, or should that be victual. Probably both.

All this may be academic because the I-speaker in a Walcott poem may sound like the poet distributing the cornucopia of his tone when in fact the I-presence could easily be an assumed identity for the benefit of the poem's outcome and not the great man at all. Poets are commendably notorious for fronting their utterances, their poems as discourses, with a first-person speaker who has nothing to do with the actual lives of the poets and everything to do with the internal logic and dynamic of the independently spirited poem. I say this because *Omeros* is peppered with declarations of faith in God by the many dramatic players in the poem, from Philoctete, nursing his wise wound, to Helen in her haughty headdress, to the inebriated bit parts by the cast of outcast Europeans roasting in the Colonies as ex-pats. The tone of the I-speaker, cognizant as it is of the nuanced language of religion hankering after a hard-won spirituality in the middle of vapid materialism, borrows heavily on this religious diction and syntax, and conveys it into the libertarian territory of a veneration of nature. This borrowing from the church of God for the preferred altar of nature results in something lost in the translation. A reader may think Derek Walcott is mounting a sophisticated claim on nature as a part of the overall scheme of an inviolable church, all-encompassing even to the point of domesticating the poetic imagination.

Perhaps the safety valve against this sophist claim is the continuous energy of the bawdy calypsonian always rearing his head during the most pious of tones. Characters swear like troopers in *Omeros* and their bodies, their composed bodies, appear on the verge of spilling into pornographic revelation, stripping away decorum (helped by rum) for the common and sexually explicit, stripped down and bare, though not reduced body, invested in the sensuous. The senses, in at least one sense, do not take prisoners, appear classless and without gender bias, and in this sense alone stands for the libertarian ideal of a freed-up imagination, unmoored from the conventions of time and place through the very contraptions supplied by the poet's time and location. This contradiction of the senses as a gateway to some other place, using the constraints of time and place to gain ground beyond it, typifies the mission of writing invested in nature and the senses, but with a spiritual goal over and above the pleasures of the senses. And it is this creative impulse that takes Derek Walcott's poetry beyond the convention of God ("past faith" as he says in his most recent book-length poem, "The Prodigal") and into the unusual sensuous realm of discovery, surprise and wonder.

NOTES

1. During the break in a roundtable discussion with Derek Walcott, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and me, moderated by Darcus Howe.
2. The poet's limited understanding expressed in the poem's tone is delimited by the formal procedures of the poem (the poem's language, metrics, lines, imagery, stanzas, phrasing, voice, and so on).

3. See the early chapters in Bruce King's biography for more on Derek Walcott's childhood.
4. Find its religious basis in John 9:5, John 8:12, and John 12:46 among others.
5. There are more updated terms for this move away from the standard vernacular or received, official code of a language for its street or popular equivalent mixed as it is with West African grammar and diction and descended from the slaves as is the case for former British colonies in the Caribbean. Kamau Brathwaite in his monograph on the beginnings of Jamaica Creole Society introduced the idea of a "nation language" in an attempt to frame the majority use of this officially unwelcome mode of communication. In Trinidad and Guyana, for example, the contribution of South Asian languages to this English instigated by mid-nineteenth-century indentureship from India is another case in point (and subject for a different essay). Walcott's Nobel acceptance speech acknowledges this Indian influence on his imaginative. See too the enormous scholarship of the two editors of this Walcott Special, both of whom have made lasting contributions to these debates.
6. *Omeros* engages with myth even as the lives of its characters are circumscribed by religion. *Tiepolo's Hound* dispenses with this religious frame and opts for art instead.
7. The awesome list of nature aligns nature's behavior with poetic modes of enquiry; nature and poetry become synonymous. Walcott repeats the phrase with a slight variance "my awe of the ordinary" on page 8 of *Tiepolo's Hound* as emblematic of his epiphany and the premise for the book-length poem.
8. See Wordsworth's 'Lines: Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey . . . ' where he argues for nature as a force in the poet's life and a prime mover which shapes poetic thought—" . . . sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; / And passing even into my purer mind," (lines 27–9).
9. Clare (1793–1864), "The grass below—above the vaulted sky" (from his poem, "I Am")—a contemplative moment in poetry, if ever there was one, largely invested in stillness, it decrees a study of nature as the subject for the poet. The image also implies a posture of death in nature—the poet laid low but not yet buried.

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