

Reading by Derek Walcott  
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INTRODUCTION: DEREK WALCOTT

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R. P. W.

(C. J. ...)

I consider it a great honor to introduce Derek Walcott, who has been, and is, one of the finest poets writing in English in our time. He clearly owes much to that tradition, and, to put matters differently, has made a vital contribution to that tradition.

One thing that underlies such a contribution is simply the self that he brings to his poetry. He was born in St. Lucia, a tiny island southeast of the Caribbean and eastwardly facing the unrest of the ocean. Another unrest, not of ocean but of the self seeking definition in the unrest of experience, underlies his poetry. As one might be tempted to say that it underlies, perhaps, all poetry. Or perhaps art. In fact, Walcott, very young, sought himself in painting before poetry. (And here, as an aside, we soon notice the visual quality of his poetry -- the intense and vivid quality of his imagery.)

Certainly a specific element in his early unrest, in addition to all those natural to mankind in youth, was his mixture of bloods: black and two orders of white, Dutch and English. What was he, where was home? This questioning, common no doubt to all mankind, was a specific force which was to drive him forth, a journey vital to that remarkable long poem "The Schooner Flight."

When he encounters the old white man said to be his grandfather, he cries out:

They say I'm your grandson. You remember Grandma,  
your black cook, at all?

Rejected by the white world, he turns to the black. But here he discovers that he "wasn't black enough for their pride." But might hope be expected in the

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I have just the record (in reel) by the same name

historical process? The answer about the historical process is in the following line of the poem:

I met History once, but he ain't recognize me.

Neither History nor Progress can "recognize" him. And even human love fails. But there is the sea, with its unrest, threatening, beautiful, and beckoning to his unrest. But even in danger the sea can image the self. And that self can recognize that the only "weapon" is poetry and poets:

. . . love the poetry  
that kills them, as drowned sailors the sea.

That is, man must take the risk of his imagination in the discovery of values in the world, the world in which values are born and asserted. Imagination is the healing and creative element in man. And this poem is the key to this poet's achievement, and it demands final risks.

And here, it may be remarked that "The Schooner Flight" can take a place beside Wordsworth's "Prelude" -- that history of the birth of poetry for a poet.

It is also the key to Walcott's later performance, in style and theme.

For one thing, this poem governs the further development of Walcott. I shall indulge myself with one observation. In style, Walcott discovers and displays the style which helps define him as important in the history of the art in our time. It is the discovery -- no, the re-discovery for a generation -- of the various factors that make for a truly dramatic sense of rhythm. I am not speaking of mere meter, or of metrical shifts as such. Meter is only one factor. Walcott does not ignore meter, but he knows what its place is, and the various contributions here involved. Assuming skill with meter, the key factor seems to be the muscular interplay of vowel and vowel "pitch" or the "weighting" of

of consonants, factors constantly played against meter and its possible expressive variations. Walcott has a secret of his <sup>not infrequently</sup> great eloquence. He is a master of the fact that poetry is, after all, an art of "voice" -- even if we hear it only in our mind, and in muscles.

If I intrude upon your pleasure, at least my heart was in the right place.  
Now I turn you over to the voice of a master.

(Walcott forward)