48 Derek Walcott (June 2022)

I've been meaning to revisit Derek Walcott for some years now. In the Nineties I had chosen to teach "The Arkansas Testament" at Sèvres – in those days schools had far more choice of texts for the special version of the French Baccalaureate we were teaching towards - I had been in almost at the birth (1985, and we moved to Sèvres in 1987) of the Option Internationale du Baccalauréat (OIB), which allows bicultural and bilingual students in France the possibility of studying English Literature and History-Geography to A Level standards under the aegis of the classic French Baccalaureate. Nowadays, the exam is on firmer foundations than it was in the beginning. For the British Option (as opposed to the American, Dutch, German, Swedish, Portuguese … et alia Options) the syllabus is now entirely chosen by Cambridge (Cambridge International Examinations or CIE), whereas in the early days, schools could put forward (voted for at general syllabus meetings with the Cambridge inspectors) their own choices of poets, novelists and dramatists, which was brilliant for teachers, but could become a little quirky for bemused students at times.

The arguments for studying Walcott were overwhelming – he had won the Nobel prize for Literature, deservedly, for his ability to transcend and revel in languages and cultures with his Antillean background, which sits so ambiguously between black Africa, America and Europe. Championed by writers like Robert Graves, Joseph Brodsky and particularly Seamus Heaney, whose own work was a formative influence on Walcott's verse, Walcott was, I thought, a gift for students studying French *and* English literature. It was a time when 'black writing' was anyway becoming increasingly necessary to offset the 'white' canon, which almost entirely neglected areas such as Britain's slave trade legacy or its growing multiculturalism.

Unfortunately, towards the end of his life, Walcott's reputation took a nosedive when he withdrew his candidacy for Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2009 after two allegations of sexual harassment (dating from 1982 and 1996) were raised in the media. Ruth Padel, also a contender for the post, apparently tipped off the press and she resigned in the resulting media shark-frenzy that was created. He died in 2017,

his reputation pretty much on the rocks as a result. How much does all of this now impact on the way we read Walcott? I'm returning to him here a little more warily, shall we say?

But I'm also aware that poets are people, set in a certain time-frame, and background and that attitudes and cultures change – that is the way of humanity. In the Eighties and Nineties, we were friendly with the old Head of English from the school where Vicki was teaching in London, the Aylwin School near London Bridge. Vron lent us her cottage in Cornwall and was a great Walcott fan, telling us that way back she had had "a fling with him" when she had been out in St Lucia. She lent me her copy of "In A Green Light", signed by 'Derek' with the following intriguing inscription: *"For VJ (wounded) (in active service) May 1962, who, before RG showed her faith in me. Derek"*. I don't know who RG is or was, but 1962 was the year when Walcott married his second wife, Margaret Maillard, with whom he had two daughters. (I'm usually good at returning books, but we lost touch and I still have the signed volume.)

On a later (warier) reading, I find his poetry as irresistible as before, *but* I'm more aware, too, of his sensuality, a sensuality that pervades his writing (and perhaps his paintings – he started off as an artist - which are brilliant and colourfully unfettered). Let's start with the collection "In A Green Night", which introduced me to his poetry. The following poem, I think, is partly a homage to Betjeman via Auden. It shows Walcott searching for his own voice and also searching for his real quest as a poet. As we shall see, Walcott is clever and imbued with the classics, both Latin and Greek, also Shakespeare and Eng. Lit. – but in this early set of poems, he hasn't really got started.

A Country Club Romance

The summer slams the tropic sun
Around all year, and Miss Gautier,
Made, as her many friends had done,
Of tennis, her deuxième-métier.

Her breathless bosom rose
As proud as Dunlop balls;
She smelled of the fresh rose
On which the white dew falls.

Laburnum-bright her hair,
Her eyes were blue as ponds,
Her thighs, so tanned and bare,
Sounder than Government bonds.

She'd drive to the Country Club
For a set, a drink, and a tan;
She smoked, but swore never to stub
Herself out on any young man.

The Club was as carefree as Paris,
Its lawns, Arcadian;
Until at one tournament, Harris
Met her, a black Barbadian.

He worked in the Civil Sevice,
She had this job in the Bank:
When she praised his forearm swerve, his
Brain went completely blank.

O love has its revenges,
Love whom man has devised;
They married and lay down like Slazengers
Together. She was ostracized.

Yet she bore her husband a fine set
Of doubles, twins. And her thanks
Went up to her God that
Her children would not work in banks.

She took an occasional whisky;
Mr Harris could not understand.
He said, 'Since you so damn frisky,
Answer this backhand!'

Next she took pills for sleeping,
And murmured lost names in the night;
She could not hear him weeping:
'Be Jeez, it serve us right.'

Her fleet life ended anno
domini 1947;
From Barclays D.C. & O.
Her soul ascends to heaven.

To Anglo-Catholic prayers
Heaven will be pervious,
Now may Archdeacon Mayers
Send her a powerful service.

Now every afternoon
When tennis soothes our hates,
Mr Harris and his sons
Drive past the C.C. gates.

While the almonds yellow the beaches,
And the breezes pleat the lake,
And the blondes pray God to 'teach us
To profit from her mistake.'

The tone may be wry and lightheartedly ironic, but as an exploration into race relations or interracial marriages, it leaves me feeling uneasy. The snobbery of the C.C. is tied up with the woman's fate, which is at the mercy of "love whom man has devised". Perhaps this is the stark warning of the poem.

The poem that follows this one is more self-searching:

Return to D'Ennery, Rain

Imprisoned in these wires of rain, I watch
This village stricken with a single street,
Each weathered shack leans on a wooden crutch,
Contented as a cripple in defeat.
Five years ago even poverty seemed sweet,
So azure and indifferent was this air,
So murmurous of oblivion the sea,
That any human action seemed a waste
The place seemed born for being buried there.
The surf explodes
In scissor-birds hunting the usual fish,

The rain is making unpaved inland roads,
So personal grief melts in the general wish.

The hospital is quiet in the rain.
A naked boy drives pigs into the bush.
The coast shudders with every surge. The beach
Admits a beaten heron. Filth and foam.
There in a belt of emerald light, a sail
Plunges and lifts between the crests of reef,
The hills are smoking in the vaporous light,
The rain seeps slowly to the core of grief.
It could not change its sorrows and be home.

It cannot change, though you become a man
Who would change compassion for a drink.,
Now you are brought to where manhood began
Its separation from 'the wounds that make you think'.
And as this rain puddles the sand, it sinks
Old sorrows in the gutter of the mind,
Where is that passionate hatred that would help
The black, the despairing poor, by speech alone?
The fury shakes like wet leaves in the wind,
The rain beats on a brain hardened to stone.

For there is a time in the tide of the heart, when
Arrived at its anchor of suffering, a grave
Or a bed, despairing in action, we ask
O God, where is our home? For no one will save
The world from itself, though he walk among men,
On such shores where the foam
Murmurs oblivion of action, though they raise
No cry like herons stoned by the rain.

The passionate exiles believe it, but the heart
Is circled by sorrows, by its horror
And bitter devotion to home.
And the romantic nonsense ends at the bowsprit, shearing
But never arriving beyond the reef-shore foam.
Or the rain cuts us off from heaven's hearing.

Why blame the faith you have lost? Heaven remains
Where it is, in the hearts of these people,
In the womb of their church, though the rain's
Shroud is drawn across its steeple.
You are less than they are, for your truth
Consists of a general passion, a personal need,
Like that ribbed wreck, abandoned since your youth
Washed over by the sour waves of greed.

The white rain draws its net along the coast,
A weak sun streaks the villages and beaches
And roads where laughing labourers come from shelter,
On heights where charcoal burners heap their days.
Yet in you it still seeps, blurring each boast
Your craft has made, obscuring words and features,
Nor have you changed from all of the known ways
To leave the mind's dark cave, the most
Accursed of God's self-pitying creatures.

I feel there is too much self-pity here, almost self-flagellation for his "bitter devotion to home". A lot of Walcott's poetry is riven with a tension between the need to escape from this island - beautiful paradise though it may seem to the tourist mind-set - and a feeling of guilt, that he and his poetry should be working harder to help his illiterate, poverty-stricken island - his people. His poetry both explores imaginatively the world about him that he knows so well, but it also creates a barrier between him and the people around him: "You are less than they, for your truth Consists of a general passion, a personal need". The rainstorm is a good focus, as a metaphor for this tension, while the poet considers leaving the ambiguous shelter of the "mind's dark cave".

There are clever touches everywhere in the collection. Here is a quick aside:

A Statue Overlooking Central Park

Turned with a lyre on a tilted hip,
Almost like earth-mothers hip-carry kids,
The Muse hath a stone breast in America.
I rest dark hands thereon, and pray for piece. *(sic!)*

And sex to sort out…

A Careful Passion

Hosanna, I build me house, Lawd,
*De rain come wash it 'way. (**Jamaican song**)*

The Cruise Inn at the city's edge,
Extends a breezy prospect of the sea
From tables fixed like islands near a hedge
Of foam-white flowers, and to deaden thought,
Marimba medleys from a local band,
To whose gay pace my love now drummed a hand.
I watched an old Greek freighter quitting port.

You hardly smell the salt breeze in this country
Except you come down to the harbour's edge.
Not like the smaller islands to the south.
There the green wave spreads on the printless beach.
I think of wet hair and a grape red mouth.
The hand which wears her husband's ring, lies
On the table idly, a brown leaf on the sand.
The other brushes off two coupling flies.
'Sometimes I wonder if you've lost your speech.'
Above our heads, the rusty cries
Of gulls revolving in the wind.
Wave after wave of memory silts the mind.

The gulls seem happy in their element.
We are lapped gently in the sentiment
Of a small table by the harbour's edge
Hearts learn to die well that have died before.

My sun-puffed carcass, its eyes full of sand,
Rolls, spun by breakers on a southern shore.
'This way is best, before we both get hurt.'
Look how I turn there, featureless, inert.
That weary phrase moves me to stroke her hand
While winds play with the corners of her skirt.
Better to lie, to swear some decent pledge,
To resurrect the buried heart again;
To twirl a glass and smile, as in pain,
At a small table at the water's edge.
'Yes, this is best, things might have grown much worse...'

And that is all the truth, it could be worse;
All is exhilaration on the eve,
Especially when the self-seeking heart
So desperate for some mirror to believe
Finds in strange eyes the old original curse.
So cha cha cha, begin the long goodbyes,
Leave the half-tasted sorrows of each pledge,
As the salt wind brings brightness to her eyes,
At a small table at the water's edge.

I walk with her into the brightening street;
Stores rattling shut, as brief dusk fills the city.
Only the gulls, hunting the water's edge
Wheel like our lives, seeking something worth pity.

It's almost embarrassing – the end of an illicit affair, detailed in such exact and seemingly shameless and unfeeling detail. It invites the thought – is Walcott just a super-cultured beach bum, loafing around, picking up women where he can? Little is betrayed about the affair itself, but for someone who feels so strongly and with such clarity, I can't help feeling surprised at his own portrayed inertia and lack of response. 'She' is apparently making the decision and he is pretending (?? "smile, as in pain") to feel distraught. Where he is, apparently, "desperate", is in wanting some "mirror to believe". Finding "in strange eyes the old original curse" almost suggests that he is blaming the woman for leading him on – that *he* is the victim of the affair (?). It all feels a bit murky.

I find the collection rather immature on rereading it. Certainly, the focus here is too inward-looking, too self-exculpatory, too aimless, though rich in observations of the island and his own shifting moods. So, I turn again to "The Arkansas Testament", remembering how difficult (but rewarding) it was to teach. The collection has a tighter structure about it for a start – it's in two parts, with "Here" grouping poems that are focused more on St Lucia, *his*

island. You have the feeling that this is more of a a mature set of reflections by someone who has escaped the 'confines' of his roots but has now returned to explore in greater depth the central ambiguities of this island, poised historically and linguistically between Africa, America, Europe with its Caribbean legacy. These tensions are further probed in the second half, entitled "Elsewhere" – looking outwards or else looking back from an outside perspective. It is confidently dedicated to Seamus Heaney, who was in a sense similarly challenged by the wish to escape the disastrous histories of Ireland (he was from a Catholic background growing up in the Protestant north) while also trying to serve his people, almost to minister to them. Like Walcott, Heaney spent a lot of time in the States outside his island. There is also a eulogy to Auden, another 'outsider', who settled in the States. "The Arkansas Testament", the long title-poem which closes the volume, has lost none of its significance in these recent times of George Floyd and the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign.

The section "Here" begins with an interesting poem, "The Lighthouse". Walcott exploits all the symbolism of a lighthouse – light to point the way and guide ships away from danger. As he writes of returning to St Lucia – he spent 20 years teaching in Boston – after 50 years 'elsewhere', he explores his feelings about Castries, his hometown.

The Lighthouse

I
Under his photographer's shroud,
the mountain facing our town
focused the sunset, pressed a cord –
all the street lamps flashed on.

I swivel his creaking set
of postcards fifty years later:
the lighthouse a silhouette
of sloops on fiery water.

Stars pierce their identical spots
over Castries; they repeat
those to-be-connected dots
in a child's book, which I complete

lamp by lamp up to La Place.
A night with white rum on its breath
walks with me at funeral pace
to lengthen the town. Underneath

the market's arc lamp, a crowd
is heckling some speaker. A face
peers at me, then loosens its screwed
squint. Shouts. The hand-pumping farce

of old times! From the headland,
briefly catching the gusty wicks
of black sea grapes, the minute hand
of the luminous dial sticks

at the New Jerusalem bar.
I order a flask of Old Oak.
The crowd follows a different star
now, but with an old patois joke

he unscrews the cap with a squint,
then gargles the politician's
harangue. In no time, I'm bent
double with laughter. Once,

he could lift hysterical fans
on the hook of an eyebrow. Their noise
is now for the speaker. Black hands
in a corner slap down domino.

Wiping wet eyes with wet palms,
Aching from all those distraught
recollections in double rums,
we split up on the dark street.

I to the black promontory
of Vigie, the dits sprinkled on
in its villas.. He to a glori-
ous piss and a sleep. A full moon

rose at the end of the road,
minting the harbour with scales.
A coin, tossed once overhead,
that stuck there, not heads or tails.

The road, held up to its light
would show, like a negative
the days I walked there; I recite
to that zero all I believe.

By the airport, across dim grave
stones, the seraphic beam revolves
its white lance. Shawled waves
spread the lace of altar cloths.

From wayside bushes, a girl's
laughter . A lit shack. Your kerosene
lamp, Philomene, that a Bible's
thin pages of calico screen.

Unaging moonlight falls
On the graves; penknives of grass
Incise other initials
On scarred desks that were ours.

But he, that lovely actor
lost in the post office! Stripped.
A superfluous character
written out of the script.

Apart from one trip abroad,
he stayed here fifty years. Fifty.
He moves with his island, the blade
of the lighthouse dips in the sea.

So, when some street lamp echoed
our ring of boys breaking up,
was the moon, rolled from its cloud,
the dice in a gambler's cup

that sent him home to a boy's
daydreams on a crowded bed?
Tonight I laughed at the voice,
not the graying, socketed head.

Does any pattern connect
the domino dots of these stars
with the black slabs ranged erect
in the palms of those gamblers?

In my room, the air conditioner's
freezing. It drips. Its racked hum
excludes you, Philomene, and the stars
in your coal pot. The heat of home.

As soon as its noise rattles off,
The surf, or a frenzy of palms,
Hisses, "You had losses. Enough.
You can't hold them all in your arms.

"For more care in the craft of verse,
kneel, for the san's moonlit linen.
For hills that ignore the moon's curse
And sleep with their windows open.

"Sleep, sleep. Tomorrow, the dread
of what may drop out of the blue."
I cannot, the levelling blade
Flashes on faces I knew.

The house where we used to live
its vine-twined verandah gone,
is a printery now; not a leaf
will curl from its pillars again.

II
Morning. Light-fingered shade. A red door,
chipped basins under a pipe,
and, from its brass crown, water
plaiting in a white whip.

Young Rastas lean in a yard.
A rooster, safe struts in the sun.
Q red-green-and-yellow board
crows: MAN IS A BABYLON.

At noon, down a crooked street,
children run screaming from school.
Some fall. Some will take the straight
road from their galvanized hell.

Then as far as that crackling noise
of a boyhood climbing the wind,
the kites of breadfruit leaves rise
from the dty yard of my mind,

as a breeze creases the sea,
shadowing the breadfruit's bark,
and brightens with January
the harbour facing La Toc.

III

The ghost of the lighthouse will sleep
all day like an actor. A song
pins sheets on a line. A white ship
carries others where they belong,

as I watch a low seagull race
its own cry, like a squeaking pin
from the postcard canoes of La Place,
where the dots I finished begin,

and a vendor smiles: "Fifty? Then
you love home harder than youth!"
Like the full moon in daylight, her thin,
Uncontradictable truth.

As an opener to the volume, this is hard to beat. It balances itself carefully between happiness or nostalgia for the past, and a cooler, more considered awareness of the straitened limits set by poverty and reduced aspirations. I love the pictorial details and the symbolic use of light that is not always positive - (the "moon's curse", the "domino dots of these stars", as well as the ambiguous "white lance" and "levelling blade" of the lighthouse itself) - particularly appropriate for St Lucia, the patron saint of blindness despite her name, though she is more directly referenced in later poems.

I also like the references to the “actor”, a reminder that Walcott’s other string to his bow is drama and play writing, something which, with poetry, helped get his career really going, here and in the USA. Ironically, the actor he admires is a sort of failed mirror image of himself. The agenda, however, is set. This is about homecoming in all its ambivalence.

I also note his more assured form. These are quatrains that immediately make one think of Heaney. The easy, rhythmical ballad structure with near rhymes is handled masterfully. The second poem, “Cul de Sac Valley” is almost a rap, in terse dimeter. It explores places geographically (and pictorially), but also linguistically and the title warns us about limits and difficulties – Cul de Sac = no way out.

Cul de Sac Valley

A panel of sunrise
on a hillside shop
gave these stanzas
their stilted shape.

If my craft is blest;
if this hand is as
accurate, as honest
as their carpenter’s,

every frame, intent
on its angles, would
echo this settlement
of unpainted wood

as consonants scroll
off my shaving plane
in the fragrant Creole
of their native grain;

from a trestle bench
they’d curl at my foot,
C’s, R’s with a French
or West African root

from a dialect throng-
ing, its leaves unread
yet light on the tongue
of their native road;

but drawing towards
my pegg'd out twine
with bevelled boards
of unpainted pine,

like muttering shale,
exhaling trees refresh
memory with their smell:
bois canot, bois campêche,

hissing: *What you wish*
from us will never be,
your words is English,
is a different tree.

II

In the rivulet's gravel
light gutturals begin,
in the valley, a mongrel,
a black vowel barking,

sends up fading ovals
by a red iron bridge,
menders with shovels
scrape bubbling pitch,

every grating squeak
reaching this height
a tongue they speak
in, but cannot write.

Like the lost idea
of the visible soul
still kindled here
on illiterate soil,

blue smoke climbs far
up, its vein unveering,
from that ochre scar
of a charcoal clearing.

Crusted clouds open
Like the pith of leaves
in a charred clay oven
wrapped in fig leaves.

In a rain barrel, water
unwrinkles to glass;
a lime tree's daughter
there studies her face.

The sapling forks into
a girl racing upstairs
from the yard, to enter
this stanza. Now tears

fill her eyes, a mirror's
tears, as her nape knot is
pulled by her mother's
comb; her mother notices,

saying: "In His countenance
are all the valleys made
shining." Her swift hands
plait the rivulet's braid.

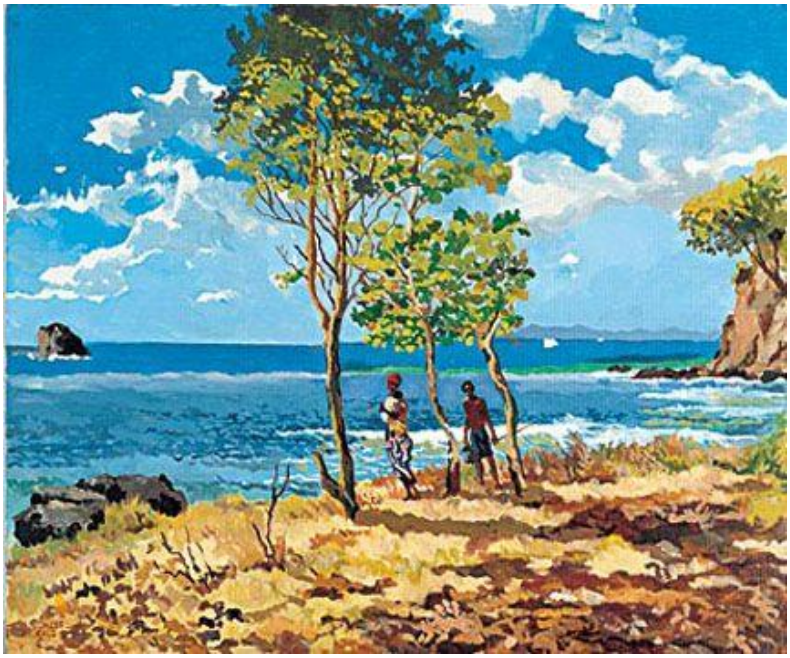
Chalk flowers that scribble
the asphalt's black slate
and the hibiscus-bell
tell her she is late,

as surf in the branches
increases like the shoal
of blue-and-white benches
in the government school,

reciting this language
that, on a blackboard
blinds her like a page
of glare on the road,

so she ambles towards
an inner silence along
a red track the forest
swallows like a tongue.

III



Noon. Dry cicadas whine
like the rusting pedals
of her mother's machine,
then stop. Lime petals

drift like snipt cloth
in the stitched silence;
like pollen, their growth
means her providence.

Noon hems a lime tree
with irregular shade;
from so much symmetry
her back is tired.

The row of Sphinxes
that my eyes rest on
are hills as fixed as
their stony question:

"Can you call each range
by its right name, aloud,
while our features change
between light and cloud?"

But my memory is small
as the sea's thin sound,
what I vaguely recall
is a line of white sand

and lines in the mahogany
of cured faces and stones
muttering under a stony
river, but the questions

dissolving will unravel
their knots – mountain
springs whose gravel
grow hoarse in rain –

as a woodsman relaxes
to hear the sky split
seconds after the axe's
stroke, the names fit

their echo: Mahaut!
Forestière! And far,
The leaf-hoarse echo
Of Mabouya! And,ah!

the hill rises and eats
from my hand, the mongrel
yelping happily, repeats
vowel after vowel,

the boughs bow to me,
the dialects applaud
as the sap of memory
rushes upward.

IV

West of each stanza
that the sunrise made,
banana fields answer
their light; overhead,

a hawk that wheeled,
my heart in its beak,
to the rim of the world
is bringing it back

to the fading bridge
to the river that turns
in its bed, to the ridge
where the tree returns

from her lessons, late.
Which shack was hers?
Now she climbs straight
Up the steps of this verse,

and sits to a supper
of bread and fry-fish
as trees repeat her
darkening English.

Shack windows flare.
Green fireflies are,
Igniting Forestière,
Orléans, Fond St Jacques,

And the forest runs
Sleeping, its eyes shut,
Except for one glance
From a lamplit hut;

Now, above the closed text
of small shacks that slid
by the headlights: the apex
of a hill like a pyramid.

In the oven-warm night
embers fly. A shop door
flings a panel of light
on the road and an odour

of saltfish. A dry sand
pile scatters in stars.
Cat-like, Pigeon Island
pins the sea in its claws.

Under the witty lightheartedness of the poem, which seems to celebrate the hills and forests of places he knows so well, there is a serious sense, too, of the importance of names and naming. The poem is in a sense reclaiming sounds as well as names. It's as if places can only emerge or progress when the sounds and the 'dialects' fit the geography and the history. Birds, saplings, people, carpentry, tree-felling, poetry and song – all must fit interchangeably. I loved *trying* to read the poem out loud to classes in a sort of West-Indian rap, which got them laughing at me, but the sounds and rhythms and these cleanly cut stanzas *are* important here. It's what I really like about his poetry – when he is warmly and acutely observing. His paintings may be a little brash and slick, but they are also warmly observant and celebrate colours, forms and people. As do his poems.

One more from "Here" before we check out "Elsewhere".

Saint Lucia's First Communion

At dusk on the edge of the asphalt's worn-out ribbon,
in white cotton frock, cotton stockings, a black child stands.
First her, then a small field of her. Ah, it's First Communion!
They hold pink ribboned missals in their hands,

the stiff plaits pinned with their white satin moths;
the caterpillar's accordion, still pumping out the myth
along twigs of cotton from whose parted mouths
the wafer pods in belief without an "if"!

So, all across Saint Lucia thousands of innocents
were arranged on church steps, facing the sun's lens,
erect as candles between squinting parents,
before darkness came on like their blinded saint's.

But if it were possible to pull up on the verge
of the dimming asphalt, before its headlights lance
their eyes, to house each child in my hands,
to lower the window a crack, and delicately urge

the last moth delicately in, I'd let the dark car
enclose their blizzard, and on some black hill,
their pulsing wings undusted, loose them in thousands to stagger
heavenward before it came on: the prejudice, the evil!

Walcott's mother was an elementary teacher in a Methodist school. His father was a painter who died young, when Walcott was only one. The family felt a bit swamped by the overwhelming Catholic culture of the island, established under French rule. This aspect comes across in the poem above, which again plays delicately with shades of black and white.

The section "Elsewhere" begins with "Eulogy to W.H. *Auden (Read at the Cathedral od St John the Divine, New York Oct 17 1983)*". I won't quote it all – it's great stuff, but the ending especially stands out:

Once, past a wooden vestry,
down still colonial streets,
the hoisted chords of Wesley
were strong as miners' throats;

in treachery and in union,
despite your Empire's wrong,
I made my first communion
there, with the English tongue.

It was such dispossession
that made possession joy,
when, strict as Psalm or Lesson,
I learnt your poetry.

III

Twilight. Grey pigeons batten
on St Mark's slate. A face
startles us with its pattern
of sunlit fire escapes.

Your slippered shadow pities
the railings where it moves
brightening with *Nunc Dimittis*
the city it still loves.

O craft, that strangely chooses
one mouth to speak for all,
O Light no dark refuses,
O Space impenetrable,

fix, among constellations,
the spark we honour here,
whose planetary patience
repeats his earthly prayer

that the City may be Just,
and humankind be kind.
A barge moves, caked with rust
in the East River wind,

and the mouths of all the rivers
are still, and the estuaries
shine with the wake that gives the
craftsman the gift of peace.

This is a fitting tribute to Auden, who had, himself, taken up residence long term in the USA, but it is also fairly aimed at himself. Walcott clearly sees himself in rhetorical style as following in such footsteps.

Here is the title-poem "Elsewhere" for the section "Elsewhere".

Elsewhere

(*for Stephen Spender*)

Somewhere a white horse gallops with its mane
plunging round a field whose sticks
are ringed with barbed wire and men
break stones or plait straw into ricks.

Somewhere women tire of the shawled sea's
weeping, for the fishermen's dories
still go out. It is blue as peace.
Somewhere they're tired of torture stories.

That somewhere there was an arrest.
Somewhere there was a small harvest
of bodies in the truck. Soldiers rest
somewhere by a road, or smoke in a forest.

Somewhere there is the conference rage
at an outrage. Somewhere a page
is torn out, and somehow, the foliage
no longer looks like leaves but camouflage.

Somewhere there is a comrade,
a writer lying with his eyes wide open
on mattress ticking, who will not read
this, or write. How to make a pen?

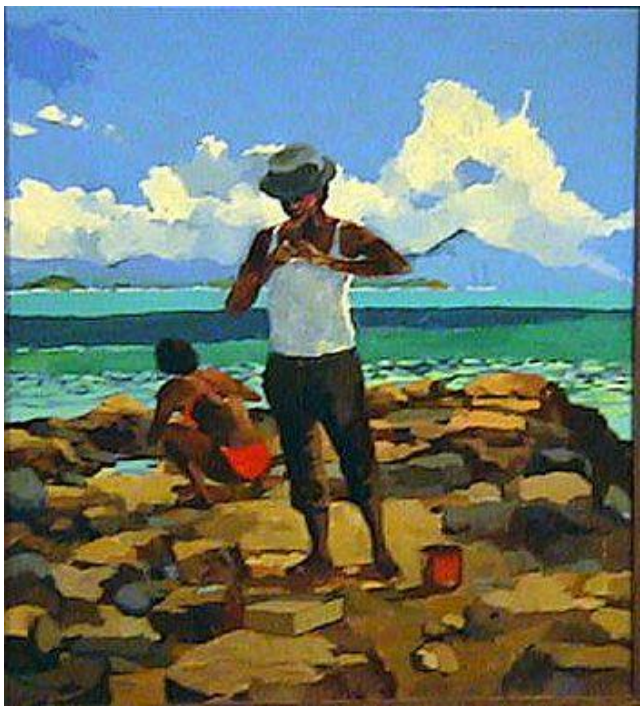
And here we are free for a while, but
elsewhere, in one third, or one seventh
of this planet, a summary rifle butt
breaks a skull into the idea of a heaven

where nothing is free, where blue air
is paper-frail, and whatever we write
will be stamped twice, a blue letter,
its throat slit by the paper knife of the state.

Through these black bars
hollowed faces stare. Fingers
are gripping the cross-bars of these stanzas
and it is here, because somewhere else

their stares fade into oblivion
thinly, like the faceless numbers
that bewilder you in your telephone
diary. Like last year's massacres.

The world is blameless. The darker crime
is to make a career of conscience,
to feel through our own nerves the silent scream
of winter branches, wonders read as signs.



The last stanza seems to me a very Heaney-like reflection, because, of course, poets *do* make a "career of conscience" on one level, as they encourage us to feel just as they have felt. The warning is a fair one, however: natural phenomena are not necessarily tied in with the ghastly inhumanity we see happening in the wider world. But, is the world so "blameless"? Is this ironic? I read it as such, though there is a sense in which we are clearly not all responsible for the atrocities committed elsewhere, though some may say that "we", the "world" *are* all implicated and should be held accountable for what happens globally.

I think it's at any rate a serious poem raising serious issues, and Walcott is quite right to reach out beyond St Lucia and the Caribbean to consider oppression in the wider world.

I imagine you are probably tiring now, so the next poem is optional…! I give it to you uncut, however, because it's in every sense a big poem which forms a fitting conclusion to the collection. It describes a visit to Arkansas made by the poet and his feelings of vulnerability as he responds to the place's historical Civil War past, its white supremacy ethos, and its day-to-day casual racism, sorely felt by the poet holed up in his tawdry motel.

The Arkansas Testament

I

Over Fayetteville, Arkansas,
a slope of memorial pines
guards the stone slabs of forces
fallen for the Confederacy
at some point in the Civil War.
The young stones, flat on their backs,
their beards curling like mosses,
have no names; an occasional surge
in the pines mutters their roster
while their centennial siege,
their entrenched metamorphosis
into cones and needles, goes on.
Over Arkansas, they can see
between the swaying cracks
in the pines the blue of the Union,
as the trunks get rustier.

II

It was midwinter. The dusk was
yielding in flashes of metal
from a slowly surrendering sun
on the billboards, storefronts, and signs
along Highway 71,
then on the brass-numbered doors
of my $17.50 motel,
and the slab of my cold key.
Jet-lagged and travel-gritty,
I fell back on the double bed
like Saul under neighing horses
on the highway to Damascus,
and lay still, as Saul does,

till my name re-entered me,
and felt, through the chained door,
dark entering Arkansas.

III

I stared back at the Celotex
ceiling of room 16,
my coat still on, for minutes
as the key warmed my palm —
TV, telephone, maid service,
and a sense of the parking lot
through cinder blocks — homesick
for islands with fringed shores
like the mustard-gold coverlet.
A roach crossed its oceanic
carpet with scurrying oars
to a South that it knew, calm
shallows of crystalline green.
I studied again how glare
dies on a wall, till a complex
neon scribbled its signature.

IV

At the desk, crouched over Mr. — —
I had felt like changing my name
for one beat at the register.
Instead, I'd kept up the game
of pretending whoever I was,
or am, or will be, are the same:
" How'll you pay for this, sir?
Cash or charge? " I missed the
chance of answering, " In kind,
like my colour. " But her gaze
was corn-country, her eyes frayed
denim. " American Express. "
On a pennant, with snarling tusk,
a razorback charged. A tress
of loose hair lifted like maize
in the lounge's indigo dusk.

V

I dozed off in the early dark
to a smell of detergent pine

and they faded with me: the rug
with its shag, pine-needled floor,
the without-a-calendar wall
now hung with the neon's sign,
no thin-lipped Gideon Bible,
no bed lamp, no magazine,
no bristle-faced fiddler
sawing at " Little Brown Jug, "
or some brochure with a landmark
by which you know Arkansas,
or a mountain spring's white babble,
nothing on a shelf, no shelves;
just a smudge on a wall, the mark
left by two uncoiling selves.

VI

I crucified my coat on one wire
hanger, undressed for bathing,
then saw that other, full-length,
alarmed in the glass coffin
of the bathroom door. Right there,
I decided to stay unshaven,
unsaved, if I found the strength.
Oh, for a day's dirt unshowered,
no plug for my grovelling razor,
to reek of the natural coward
I am, to make this a place for
disposable shavers as well
as my own disposable people!
On a ridge over Fayetteville,
higher than any steeple,
is a white-hot electric cross.

VII

It burns the back of my mind.
It scorches the skin of night;
as a candle repeats the moment
of being blown out, it remained
when I switched off the ceiling light.
That night I slept like the dead,
or a drunk in the tank, like moss
on a wall, like a lover happier
in the loss of love, like soldiers
under the pines, but, as I dreaded,
rose too early. It was four.

Maybe five. I only guessed
by the watch I always keep
when my own house is at rest.
I opened the motel door.
The hills never turned in their sleep.

VIII

Pyjamas crammed in my jacket,
the bottoms stuffed into trousers
that sagged, I needed my fix —
my 5 a.m. caffeine addiction.
No rooster crew brassily back at
the white-neon crucifix,
and Arkansas smelt as sweet
as a barn door opening. Like horses
in their starlit, metallic sweat,
parked cars grazed in their stalls.
Dawn was fading the houses
to an even Confederate grey.
On the far side of the highway,
a breeze turned the leaves of an aspen
to the First Epistle of Paul's
to the Corinthians.

IX

The asphalt, quiet as a Sabbath,
by municipal sprinklers anointed,
shot its straight and narrow path
in the white, converging arrows
of Highway 71. They pointed
to Florida, as if tired warriors
dropped them on the Trail of Tears,
but nothing stirred in response
except two rabbinical willows
with nicotine beards, and a plaid
jacket Frisbeeing papers
from a bike to silvery lawns,
tires hissing the peace that passeth
understanding under the black elms,
and morning in Nazareth
was Fayetteville's and Jerusalem's.

X

Hugging walls in my tippler's hop —

the jive of shuffling bums,
a beat that comes from the chain —
I waited for a while by the grass
of a urinous wall to let
the revolving red eye on top
of a cruising police car pass.
In an all-night garage I saw
the gums of a toothless sybil
in garage tires, and she said:
STAY BLACK AND INVISIBLE
TO THE SIRENS OF ARKANSAS .
The snakes coiled on the pumps
hissed with their metal mouth:
Your shadow still hurts the South,
like Lee's slowly reversing sword.

XI

There's nothing to understand
in hunger. I watched the shell
of a white sun tapping its yolk
on the dark crust of Fayetteville,
and hurried up in my walk
past warming brick to the smell
of hash browns. Abounding light
raced towards me like a mongrel
hoping that it would be caressed
by my cold, roughening hand,
and I prayed that all could be blest
down Highway 71, the grey calm
of the lanes where a lion
lies down on its traffic island,
a post chevroning into a palm.
The world warmed to its work.

XII

But two doors down, a cafeteria
reminded me of my race.
A soak cursed his vinyl table
steadily, not looking up.
A tall black cook setting glazed
pies, a beehive-blond waitress,
lips like a burst strawberry,
and her " Mornin' " like maple syrup.
Four DEERE caps talking deer hunting.
I looked for my own area.

The muttering black decanter
had all I needed; it could sigh for
Sherman's smoking march to Atlanta
or the march to Montgomery.
I was still nothing. A cipher
in its bubbling black zeros, here.

XIII

The self-contempt that it takes
to find my place card among any
of the faces reflected in lakes
of lacquered mahogany
comes easily now. I have laughed
loudest until silence kills
the shoptalk. A fork clicks
on its plate; a cough's rifle shot
shivers the chandeliered room.
A bright arm shakes its manacles.
Every candle-struck face stares into
the ethnic abyss. In the oval
of a silver spoon, the window
bent in a wineglass, the offal
of flattery fed to my craft,
I watch the bright clatter resume.

XIV

I bagged the hot Styrofoam coffee
to the recently repealed law
that any black out after curfew
could be shot dead in Arkansas.
Liberty turns its face; the doctrine
of Aryan light is upheld
as sunrise stirs the lion-
coloured grasses of the veld.
Its seam glints in the mind
of the golden Witwatersrand,
whose clouds froth like a beer stein
in the Boer's sunburnt hand;
the world is flushed with fever.
In some plaid-flannel wood
a buck is roped to a fender —
it is something in their blood.

XV

In a world I saw without end as
one highway with signs, low brown
motels, burger haciendas,
a neat, evangelical town
now pointed through decorous oaks
its calendar comfort — scary
with its simple, God-fearing folks.
Evil was as ordinary
here as good. I kept my word.
This, after all, was the South,
whose plough was still the sword,
its red earth dust in the mouth,
whose grey division and dates
swirl in the pine-scented air —
wherever the heart hesitates
that is its true frontier.

XVI

On front porches every weak lamp
went out; on the frame windows
day broadened into the prose
of an average mid-American town.
My metre dropped its limp.
Sunlight flooded Arkansas.
Cold sunshine. I had to draw
my coat tight from the cold, or
suffer the nips of arthritis,
the small arrows that come with age;
the sun began to massage
the needles in the hill's shoulder
with its balsam, but hairs
fall on my collar as I write this
in shorter days, darker years,
more hatred, more racial rage.

XVII

The light, being amber, ignored
the red and green traffic stops,
and, since it had never met me,
went past me without a nod.
It sauntered past the shops,
peered into AUTOMOBILE SALES ,
where a serenely revolving Saab

sneered at it. At INDIAN CRAFTS
it regilded the Southern Gothic
sign, climbed one of the trails,
touching leaves as it sent
shadows squirrelling. Its shafts,
like the lasers of angels, went
through the pines guarding each slab
of the Confederate Cemetery,
piercing the dead with the quick.

XVIII

Perhaps in these same pines runs,
with cross ties of bleeding thorns,
the track of the Underground Rail-
road way up into Canada,
and what links the Appalachians
is the tinkle of ankle chains
running north, where history is harder
to bear: the hypocrisy
of clouds with Puritan collars.
Wounds from the Indian wars
cut into the soft plank tables
by the picnic lake, and birches
peel like canoes, and the maple's
leaves tumble like Hessians;
hills froth into dogwood, churches
arrow into the Shawmut sky.

XIX

O lakes of pines and still water,
where the wincing muzzles of deer
make rings that widen the idea
of the state past the calendar!
Does this aging Democracy
remember its log-cabin dream,
the way that a man past fifty
imagines a mountain stream?
The pines huddle in quotas
on the lake's calm water line
that draws across them straight as
the stroke of a fountain pen.
My shadow's scribbled question
on the margin of the street
asks, Will I be a citizen
or an afterthought of the state?

XX

Can I bring a palm to my heart
and sing, with eyes on the pole
whose manuscript banner boasts
of the Union with thirteen stars
crossed out, but is borne by the ghosts
of sheeted hunters who ride
to the fire-white cross of the South?
Can I swear to uphold my art
that I share with them too, or worse,
pretend all is past and curse
from the picket lines of my verse
the concept of Apartheid?
The shadow bends to the will
as our oaths of allegiance bend
to the state. What we know of evil
is that it will never end.

XXI

The original sin is our seed,
and that acorn fans into an oak;
the umbrella of Africa's shade,
despite this democracy's mandates,
still sprouts from a Southern street
that holds grey black men in a stoop,
their flintlock red eyes. We have shared
our passbook's open secret
in the hooded eyes of a cop,
the passerby's unuttered aside,
the gesture involuntary, signs,
the excessively polite remark
that turns an idea to acid
in the gut, and here I felt its
poison infecting the hill pines,
all the way to the top.

XXII

Sir, you urge us to divest
ourselves of all earthly things,
like these camphor cabinets
with their fake-pine coffins;
to empty the drawer of the chest
and look far beyond the hurt

on which a cross looks down,
as light floods this asphalt
car park, like the rush Tower
where Raleigh brushes his shirt
and Villon and his brothers cower
at the shadow of the still knot.
There are things that my craft cannot
wield, and one is power;
and though only old age earns the
right to an abstract noun

XXIII

this, Sir, is my Office,
my Arkansas Testament,
my two cupfuls of Cowardice,
my sure, unshaven Salvation,
my people's predicament.
Bless the increasing bliss
of truck tires over asphalt,
and these stains I cannot remove
from the self-soiled heart. This
noon, some broad-backed maid,
half-Indian perhaps, will smooth
this wheat-coloured double bed,
and afternoon sun will reprint
the bars of a flag whose cloth —
over motel, steeple, and precinct —
must heal the stripes and the scars.

XXIV

I turned on the TV set.
A light, without any noise,
in amber successive stills,
stirred the waves off Narragansett
and the wheat-islanded towns.
I watched its gold bars explode
on the wagon axles of Mormons,
their brows and hunched shoulders set
toward Zion, their wide oxen road
raising dust in the gopher's nostrils;
then a gravelly announcer's voice
was embalming the Black Hills —
it bade the Mojave rejoice,
it switched off the neon rose
of Vegas, and its shafts came to

the huge organ pipes of sequoias,
the Pacific, and Today 's news.

I think this is a totally wonderful poem that shows Walcott responding fully and with restrained anger – above all, hypersensitive to the minutiae of his stay there, imbuing them with significance and intelligence. The 24 stanzas reflect a 24-hour cycle that takes in not just Arkansas, but the whole of the USA and its oppressive history. Like Auden ("poetry changes nothing…") he's more than aware of the limits of his art ("There are things that my craft cannot wield, and one is power"). The final stanzas are ironic, transcendent and moving as he watches the "gold bars" of the TV while the images trek westwards to "sequoias,
the Pacific, and Today 's news".

Although my faith in his art by this poem alone is amply restored, I, nevertheless, have solid misgivings about his attitude to women in his poetry. Nowhere does he honour the women in his life – his wives, his mother, nor even the girlfriends. In "The Light of the World", he describes a mini-bus journey where he openly lusts after a young black girl and her friend:

"The van was slowly filling in the dark depot.
I sat in the front seat, I had no need for time.
I looked at two girls, one in a yellow bodice
and yellow shorts, with a flower in her hair,
and lusted in peace, the other less interesting.
That evening I had walked the streets of the town
where I was born and grew up, thinking of my mother
and her white hair tinted by the dyeing dusk,
and the tilting box houses that seemed perverse
in their cramp…"

An old woman climbs in and he reflects about how these people have been "abandoned" and how he feels that he "… had abandoned them…". Becoming more maudlin, as he listens to Bob Marley on the radio, he continues with:

"I was deeply in love with the woman by the window.
I wanted to be going home with her this evening…
….. I wanted her to change
into a white nightie that would pour like water
over the black rocks of her breasts… "

It goes on and on, I'm afraid, quite embarrassingly as he fantasises about her – "But the others, too" - to a point where, "Because I felt a great love that could bring me to tears And a pity that prickles my eyes like a nettle, I was afraid I might suddenly start sobbing". But he gets off at the Halcyon Hotel "without saying good night. Good night would be full of inexpressible love." In the end, the only thing he can bestow on his people is the poem itself – "this thing I have called 'The Light of the World'. (…who is, of course, the radiant girl!)

In other poems, his attitude to women can be carelessly offhand. In "Mimi – the Near-Suicide", which is so short I can quote it in full, we get an ironic (humorous?) glimpse of a woman thinking of suicide – the poem is uncontextualized – and the joke, if it is a joke, is not that funny. I guess the point is that where suicide is almost *celebrated* in literature, the despair felt by a St Lucian woman is tawdrier. But there is no sense of genuine compassion or real investigation; I feel it is just Walcott trying to be clever.

Mimi – The Near-Suicide

"Somebody told her she had sad, interesting eyes.
After that, that was it. She stopped by the bridge.
She studied the river's coiled, interesting dyes.
Must drop in for a visit. Good career move:
Ophelia, Mrs Woolf, and the feminist garbage.
A much better ending than plain, provincial love:
a sodden sidewalk, a soaked brown paper bag."

So, if I were teaching him now, there would be quite a few more caveats. The poetry is stylish, always interesting and thought-provoking, but his careless attitude to women would definitely have to be pointed out and his poetry reconsidered in the light of his attitudes.

I hope, if nothing else, that if you haven't come across his verse before, that it has awakened your curiosity. I have not yet read "Omeros" which was his last major work and was lauded critically. I may go on now to check it over (if it's not too long…!).