

Mythological Aspects of Derek Walcott's Drama

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To speak of the need for myth, in the case of the imaginative writer, is a sign of his felt need for communion with his society, for a recognized status as artist functioning within society.¹

ASIDE from the general necessity for myth in any culture, the writer in the West Indies must contend with the shattered history of transplantation, imperial subjugation, and colonial neglect. V. S. Naipaul complained in *The Middle Passage*: "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands. Here the West Indian writers have failed."² Naipaul migrated, but he and others, some of whom remained behind or later returned home, have not ignored the challenge of piecing together the fragments of social and cultural identity that are left in the wake of slavery, indentured servitude, the decline of empire, and the birth of the Third World.

For nearly twenty years this task has been an integral part of the work produced by St. Lucia-born Derek Walcott. This is not to say that Walcott has always intended to create myths; but, at times deliberately and at other times by implication only, he delineates the innermost character of a people, the essence of what it means to have been born West Indian. In a broad sense this is a primary function of myth. The term has been used in too many peculiar ways to be narrowly applied in the West Indian situation. Walcott is mythopoetic because there are motifs, characters, actions, and symbols in his poetry and drama that provide coherent patterns of belief, explanations of a way of life.

Individual poems and even titles of collections of his poetry reflect the areas of meaning that come into focus at various stages of his career. The title *In a Green Night* (1962), taken from Marvell's "Bermudas," reflects the bias of Walcott's classical education. Steeped in the civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Britain during his school days, he admits to seeing himself as an extension of Marlowe and Milton.³ Even though set in the islands, much of his early poetry displays the intellectual discipline of Elizabethan courtiers. Western classics, however, constitute but one side of his mythic pantheon: Africa furnishes the other, thus the prevalence of "mulatto angst" in a poem like "A Far Cry from Africa":

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided in the vein?
.....

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?⁴

The Castaway (1965), reprinting much of *Selected Poems* (1962), and *The Gulf* (1969) containing selections from *The Castaway*, are laced with the concerns of a man abandoned in a world not of his choosing. The emblematic figure in these books is Crusoe, "from shipwreck, hewing a prose as odorous as raw wood to the adze."⁵ The figure grows in the concluding poem of *The Gulf* into the confessional poet determined to lift the burden of fate by merging with it:

I pretended subtly to lose myself in crowds
knowing my passage would alter their reflection,
I was that muscle shouldering the grass
through ordinary earth,
commoner than water I sank to lose my name,
this was my second birth.⁶

That second birth results in *Another Life* (1972), a virtual portrait of the artist as a young man. Without losing the preciseness of word and image, but within an idiom and a rhythm more closely approximating those of his island background, Walcott re-creates the conflicting forces that shape

his world. The child of mixed blood and heritage, experiencing the tutelage of peasant, friend, and priest, learns to live through art. He is conscious, throughout, that what he is dealing with is the raw material of an unwritten epic; yet he maintains the essential distance of an artist. Self-deprecating honesty preserves equilibrium as he concludes Part One:

Provincialism loves the pseudo-epic,
so if these heroes have been given a stature
disproportionate to their cramped lives,
remember I beheld them at knee-height,
and that their thunderous exchanges
rumbled like gods about another life.⁷

Then concluding the poem with an oblique tribute to his deceased mentor Harry Simmons and to his friend "Gregorias", a cool solemnity prevails: "We were blest with a virginal, unpainted world / with Adam's task of giving things their names" (p. 152).

Sea Grapes, Walcott's latest book of poetry, extends the themes projected in his early poems. His Caribbean islands are at the crossroads of civilization. Situated between the Old and the New Worlds, between the North and South American continents, the West Indian is afforded a unique perspective on history and on modern life. The concluding stanza of "New World" reads:

Adam had an idea.
He and the snake would share
the loss of Eden for a profit.
So both made the New World. And it looked good.⁸

Thus, for Walcott, coming together in the archetypal figure of Adam are the disparate roles of the outcast (victim of oppression), the poet (giver of names), the conqueror (who imposes law), and the exploiter (who exacts profit).

Such a sketchy resumé as is attempted here is unfair to the depth and rich variety of Walcott's poetry, but it serves to isolate some of the touchstones of his mythology. In one guise or another, in various contexts are the lineaments of the New World Adam, the divided man, the fallen dreamer. The descendant of slaves and conquistadors, this Adam is forced to build, like Milton's Satan, with the spoils

of defeat. Walcott has no grandiose image of an Eden which can be reclaimed from the past. In fact, in his essay, "What the Twilight Says," he chides African pastoralists whose daydream of a lost mother prevents their attempting a new fusion:

What is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew, so that mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word Ashanti as with the word Warwickshire . . . both baptising . . . this hybrid, this West Indian. (p. 10)

Walcott explains the problem. The slave has proved to be as avaricious as his enslaver. Renunciation of the master then exchanging places with him — white for black power — is no solution. The New World Negro establishes his rightful place not by pursuing European whiteness or African blackness, but through the

. . . forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things . . . settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folk-songs and fables; this, not merely the debt of history was his proper claim to the New World. (p. 17)

Although Walcott denies poverty as a virtue, he recognizes a latent nobility in the poor who cannot escape their island exile. He sees these as having the theatre of their daily lives. Even though they are trapped, he calls them heroic "because they have kept the sacred urge of actors everywhere: to record the anguish of the race" (p. 5).

To define goals and assert values is an essential step; the achievement of tangible results is another matter. In order to effect his plan more deliberately, Walcott co-founded, in 1950, the Arts Guild of St. Lucia, and then he established the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959. The transition from a discussion of his poetry to his drama is facilitated by the fact that his plays are poetic — especially the latest plays which are like narrative poems generously interspersed with song.

If the impact of the plays is greater than that of the poems (and the matter is certainly not settled), then it is

probably because the stage is a more dynamic and physical medium of expression. In his collection of essays entitled *The Use of Poetry*, T. S. Eliot asserts, "the ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre."⁹ The play invites more immediate communal participation; more of the senses are engaged as the audience shares an experience that is hardly one remove from ritual. Walcott knows his audience, and the theory behind his productions is aimed at precise impressions. Feeling that the besetting sin of West Indian art is self-indulgent exuberance, Walcott wants disciplined theatre. At the same time he wishes to retain the vital earthiness that permeates West Indian folklore. Comparing St. Lucian mountains, trees and local legends with those of Ireland, Walcott establishes precedent for the regional characteristics of his plays. His precedent for discipline comes circuitously through the example of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. After reading Brecht, Walcott learned to appreciate the emphatic power of rhythm, form, gesture, and restraint exemplified in the Noh and Kabuki plays. Just as the West Indian populace is a mixture of African, Chinese, Indian, and Caucasian strains, he draws from divergent traditions. These are explained in a 1970 *Savacou* article, "Meanings": from Europe there is classical literature; from Africa and Asia there are elements of dance, mime, and narrative.¹⁰ The third major element in the formula is a positive "masculine virility," whose meaning is clear enough. Rather than a static, introverted play, Walcott wants assertive, physical strength with emphasis less on psychology than on open conflict. Through a merger of two strains — one more dependent on logical exposition, the other relying heavily on expressive movement — a national theatre could be generated, one equally adept at Shakespeare and Calypso.

A poet-playwright turned manager, director and producer of epic theatre risks over-extending himself, is in danger of over-burdening the symbols and motifs that arise naturally from the context of a particular life experience. Walcott's

success at transmuting his personal experience into an artistic one can be measured by the steady growth of a receptive audience, both at home and abroad, and by the authoritative ring of truth as the implications of his themes emerge more and more clearly. Unfortunately, a major obstacle to reaching a broad overview of Walcott's drama is the fact that only four of his plays have been published by a major commercial press.¹¹ Early ones exist in manuscript (some incomplete); others in limited editions were printed by the Extra-Mural Department of the University of the West Indies and by small regional publishers; the most recent are still in a state of evolution: Walcott seems reluctant to accept a version as absolutely finished. In spite of the difficulties, however, it is possible to find a sufficient number of lesser-known plays while wishing they were more readily available.

There are at least six titles that predate *Henri Christophe* (1950), but since Walcott refers to it as his first full-length play, it is the most logical place to begin searching out the mythological elements in his drama. *Henri Christophe* and *Drums and Colours* (a play commissioned for the opening of the first Parliament of the West Indies in 1958, and subtitled "An Epic Drama") are unique among Walcott's mythically-oriented plays in that they are based on legendary figures from actual history. As a young man of nineteen, Walcott saw Haiti's revolutionary heroes — Toussaint, Dessalines, Christophe — "magnified into myth." They had presumed to challenge an ordered universe, and the God of that universe exacted severe retribution as a master chastises his disobedient slave. He was correct in depicting their self-contempt and their foreshadowing of the "contradictions of being white in mind and black in body," but he later realized that their tragedy was not a simple matter of their blackness: "Now, one may see such heroes as squalid fascists who chained their own people."¹² Yet their violent attempt to break an old servitude was a necessary

prelude to self-discovery, to the even more tragic realization that tyranny knows no complexion.

Henri Christophe follows important historical events, but the play itself does not carry the conviction of inner truth. One problem is with the Renaissance polish on words and images that seems inconsistent with the rough anguish and dignity of the characters being described. There is fine poetry in the lines Christophe uses to express his grief upon learning of Toussaint's death. The sentiment rings hollow more for the archaic language than for the fact that Christophe is himself one of Toussaint's betrayers:

Christophe: Fold up your hopes to show them to your children,
Because the sun has settled now
Behind the horizon of our bold history.
Now no man can measure the horizon
Of his agony; this grief is wide, wide,
A ragged futility that beats against these rocks,
like Sea-bell's angelus.
The man is dead, history has betrayed us.¹³

Even allowing for poetic convention, there is little evidence in this play of the sweat that Christophe celebrates later: "The nigger smell, that even kings must wear, / Is bread and wine to life" (p. 50).

Perhaps for this reason, Walcott's next play, *Harry Dernier*, a tour de force for radio production, shifts toward the vernacular, though it is still literary in style and highly metaphysical in tone. In places it approaches the syntax of *The Waste Land*. Not inconsequentially the protagonist is the ultimate wastelander. Instead of drawing upon an imposing figure from the past, Walcott looks forward to the last man on Earth. *Dernier* is introspective, raising the existential questions about the essence of life, death, sin, God, and his own being. All are issues central to mythology and their explicit treatment in this early play signals the foundation of Walcott's developing mythopoeia. The play runs only twenty minutes, but the history of mankind flashes by through a catalogue of names from Adam to Einstein, ranging through artists, scientists, philosophers, and Greek gods. *Dernier's* greatest temptation, encouraged

by a female voice, is to re-create life. "Lily the Lady" represents the life force and the ordering principle of civilization which, ironically, drives man to final destruction. The confirmed misanthrope argues:

Haven't you seen plagues, explosions, man's knowledge?
 Surely the womb is the meaning of war.
 Repent, repent . . . I will not be tempted again. . . .
 Perhaps now, self murder is in order . . .
 You hear God's vultures creaking in the sky, and they obey
 God's own laws too.
 Our sin is flesh.¹⁴

Both *Dernier* and *Lily* look for causes of the holocaust in the Christian tradition: he cites pride; she, punning heavily, refers to the Tree of Knowledge:

. . . Why did the world end?
 Sin, I suppose; they new [sic] too much
 Aeonstain [sic], and Openhimmel [sic] . . . It's a nightmare,
 like one of those
 Desert island gags. But I'm alive. (p. 7)

Whatever the cause, *Dernier's* solution is death. He despises the positive-negative split within his person; he is sick of loneliness, and he cannot bear the responsibility and guilt inherent in choice.

Harry Dernier is a significant prelude to Walcott's subsequent plays because it demonstrates the broader human implications of his drama even as that drama adapts more and more to the racial and social background of the West Indian scene. For the most part, leading characters in the plays since 1951 have tended to be developed in either of two directions. On the one hand, Walcott calls forth the underlying strength and grace which sustain men in the lowest stations of life; on the other, he exposes the supernatural essence of an unusual man involved in the realm of human action — these, without the idealization of either the lower classes or of the hero.

Seven years after *Harry Dernier*, in *Drums and Colours*, Walcott's second return to West Indian history, the French General Le Clerc spells out the fallibility of that sacred construct, "the people":

The people have always chosen their particular demon,
 They created their Caesar as they created Napoleon.
 But you have been reading Rousseau and Montesquieu,
 They are romantics overcome by the odours of the mob.¹⁵

Le Clerc goes on to admit that he is a cynic, that as a former advocate of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, he is disillusioned by democratic despotism. He predicts the outcome of the Haitian revolt:

There will not be liberty but mere patterns of revenge.
 The history of man is founded on human nature, and
 We cannot exorcise the guilt of original sin. (p. 61)

Because their situations are radically different, Le Clerc's pessimism is more moderate than Harry Dernier's. But there is a pervasive sadness in *Drums and Colours* which contrasts ironically with the actions of discovery and development that are being dramatized. The contrast is subtle and effective. Christopher Columbus, returning to Europe in chains, wonders what will be made of the world he discovered. A tribal king, enslaved, is transported through the middle passage. Inspired by tales of a fabulous, golden city in the jungles of Guiana, Sir Walter Raleigh sacrifices fortune, reputation, his son, and finally his life pursuing the dream of conquest. In a comic interlude, a Barbadian slave, houseproud and jealous of the dignity of imperial sway, castigates a drunken British sailor for conduct unbecoming a guardian of colonial decency. Toussaint L'Ouverture, sick of bloodshed, is betrayed by his generals Dessalines and Christophe. In Jamaica, George William Gordon, a white man, is executed for advocating emancipation. Fallen upon economic and political hardships, a guerilla band made up of a white land-owner, his mulatto mistress, a Negro, an East Indian and a Chinese cook share a pot of calaloo.

Comic scenes and touches of humor intersperse the play to mitigate the somber picture of exploitation, betrayal, and deprivation. In the concluding scene, a character named Mano offers a positive moral — that little men are as worthwhile as the great — and the chorus ties up the scattered fragments of history:

That web Columbus shuttled took its weave,
 Skein over skein to knit this various race,
 Though warring elements of the past compounded
 To coin our brotherhood in this little place. (p. 100)

Drums and Colours, then, appears as a pageant with a didactic purpose. It combines the historical thrust of *Henri Christophe* with the existential anguish of Harry Dernier; and as the chorus indicates in concluding Part One, the narrative contains the matrix of West Indian life: "How shall we live, till these ghosts bid us live?" (p. 57).

This matrix has given life to each of Walcott's plays whether he portrays the downtrodden man, the restless colonizer, or the larger-than-life hero of legend. His journey into the innermost regions of the West Indian psyche is marked by the gradual evolution of his particular style of dramatic expression. The *Sea at Dauphin* (1954), the most perfectly executed of his early plays, is a confessed imitation of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Walcott could hardly have found a more compatible predecessor. In the preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge acknowledges his debt to the language and folk imagination of the fishermen, peasants, and ballad-singers along the Irish coast. He says all art is collaboration, that "in a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry."¹⁶ In the West Indies, as in Synge's Ireland, the folk idiom and imagination are vibrantly alive. There is something about plays like *Riders to the Sea* and *The Sea at Dauphin* that is elemental, close to the source of life. To speak of their mythopoetic quality, however, is to speak more of symbol and atmosphere than of the machinations of gods.

In these plays the sea represents the unpredictable forces of nature with which men have to contend for their lives. Theirs is a daily battle which, if unspectacular, is still no less heroic than the theft of the fire from the gods. Such a comparison is not as unwarranted as it sounds on the surface. Walcott's Afa, a fisherman, engages in repartee

with other villagers in a mixed patois of French and English. He works hard and receives little return; he recounts the litany of his failures and of the fishermen who have died, but even in the face of inevitable defeat, he defies the sea and the God who ignores his prayers.

God is a white man. The sky is his blue eye,
 His spit on Dauphin people is the sea.
 Don't ask me why a man must work so hard
 To eat for worm to get more fat. Maybe I bewitch.
 You never curse God, I curse him, and cannot die,
 Until His time.¹⁷

The name of Afa's boat, "Our Daily Bread," is both metaphor and literal fact. Afa's recitation of the names of fishermen who have lost their lives at sea is a chronicle of the village's past. Growing out of this blending of metaphor and reality is an image of the cyclical nature of existence. Individuals come and pass; their legacy is the name and the memory they leave behind. Their collective record spells out the terms of Dauphin life. During the action of the play, one aged man, Hounakin, chooses death in the sea over continued suffering. What saves the plot from tragedy and sends it off into yet another cycle is the appearance of young Jules. Jules, son of Habal, the man who first took Afa out to sea, comes to him for work. At this point Afa, childless, an unfeeling outcast, begins the initiation of the next generation. To Jules' advocate he says,

tell the boy it make you sour and old and good for nothing standing on two feet when forty years you have. . . . Ask him if he remember Habal, and then Bolo. If he say yes, tell him he must brave like Hounakin, from young he is. Brave like Habal to fight sea at Dauphin. This piece of coast is make for men like that. Tell him Afa do it for his father sake. (p. 76)

With its fullness of character and theme, and its terse, simple development, *The Sea at Dauphin* is a fine, one-act play. It also serves as a good introduction to the language and life of Walcott's native island.

Ione (1957) moves deeper into St. Lucian folk tradition with the introduction of a greater number of characters, including an old prophetess, Teresine. Passions run high in

this play, and the presence of the supernatural is emphasized not only by Teresine, but also by the almost casual manner in which Ione, her sister Helene, and others court disaster. They function according to drives and feelings that are greater than they can control. The central conflict is between two mountain families over land. Their uneasy peace turns to violence because of marital infidelity and the thirst for revenge. Several details such as talk of the remnants of noble African ancestry, of the rights of the stronger rival to dominate the land, the appearance of a "civilized" black school teacher who claims immunity to the tribal conflict, and the blond American who has abandoned Ione with his unborn child, all contribute to the definition of place in this drama. What is noteworthy is that in spite of the concrete setting (local characters, idiom, and themes), the inevitability of brooding fate, the women's chorus, and the Greek names of several of the characters generate a mood that is remarkably similar to Classical tragedy.

This last observation is certainly no indictment, but simply recognizes the duality of Walcott's art at this point. Within the year following first production of *Ione*, he discovered the formula that best suited his dramatic purposes. He records the event in "Meanings":

The first real experience I had of writing a stylized West Indian play was . . . a West Indian fable called *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*. For the first time I used songs and dances and a narrator in a text. . . . Out of that play, I knew what I wanted. (p. 46)

Ti-Jean and His Brothers (first production, 1958) marks a turning point. Walcott continues to work on basic themes and characters which seem uniquely suited to the West Indies.¹⁸ What changes is the expanded form of presentation as, for the first time, he adopts what he has learned through Brecht and Oriental theatre. Given the importance of narrative, dance, and song in the Caribbean islands, the old message takes on a new dimension — a richer mode of preconscious expressiveness.

Albert Ashaolu sees no fewer than six allegories in *Ti-Jean*: allegories of the artist, history, politics, morality, Christianity, and social class.¹⁹ Theodore Colson counts only two levels of meaning, but his categories are much broader: man's confrontation with evil, and more particularly the slave's confrontation with the white master.²⁰ However one approaches the matter, the play reveals inner truths that may be discussed in terms of myth. Walcott's use of a frog as narrator creates an initial impression of the folktale with echoes of the African animal fable and, by mentioning Aeschylus, an open invitation to comparisons with Greek choruses. After that the story itself is a fantasy with characters who are obviously "stylized" types as animals are in fables. At the deepest level the deceptively simple tale is about the existence of evil, and man's comportment toward God in a less than perfect universe. The Devil, unable to enjoy his own vices because he cannot feel human passion, challenges three brothers to a test of will-power. Either way the trial goes, the Devil stands to win: if a brother arouses his anger, he will have the satisfaction of feeling passion; if a brother loses his temper first, the Devil gets to eat him. The eldest, Gros Jean, depends exclusively on his strength to overcome the Devil, who appears in the mask of a white plantation owner. When he fails, the second brother, Mi-Jean, attempts to bargain, using his learning. His defeat leaves the task in the hands of Ti-Jean who claims neither power nor knowledge. In the Devil's words, Ti-Jean's strength lies in man-wit or common sense. Another way to describe it, that takes into account the paradoxical nature of life, is to say that Ti-Jean's weakness is his strength. He has sufficient humility to respect his enemy and a sense of humor that never allows his values to become distorted. As the Devil attempts to make him angry (to lose self-control) and thus lose the contest, Ti-Jean follows the advice of his aged mother (experience) and of lowly animals (instinct) from whom he learns to respect nature and to use his wits. When

the Devil assigns him impossible tasks — counting the leaves in a cane field, tethering on oversexed goat that will not stay tied, singing as his mother dies — Ti-Jean outdoes him by burning the cane and the plantation, by castrating and later eating the goat, and by singing as tears fall from his eyes.

Ti-Jean's tricks and his resilience cause the Devil to laugh, rage, and cry in turn. Thus Ti-Jean wins the contest; but as a poor loser, the Devil concedes Ti-Jean's prize of one wish only, leaving the door open for future encounters. The beauty of Ti-Jean's humanity is nowhere more evident than when he uses his one wish, not selfishly but by heeding the plea of the Bolom (an unborn foetus) for the gift of life. For the ambiguity in that gift it is necessary only to recall the mother's words in Scene Three: "have I not given / Birth and death to the dead?"²¹ In spite of the necessary linkage of death with life, the Bolom chooses life with its joy and sorrow, and he claims Ti-Jean as his new brother.

No prose summation does justice to the movement and color of dance, music, and humor of *Ti-Jean*. Moreover, since both vehicle and message are so uniquely West Indian in flavor, this play stands as Walcott's earliest, thoroughly integrated West Indian drama. As such it contains many of the prominent candidates for Walcott's pantheon. Misguided pride in strength and knowledge follows the same pattern set by the clansmen and the "civilized" teacher in *Ione*. Also, like the prophetess in *Ione*, the mother is as closely attuned to the processes of life as any earth-mother. Evil, no longer an impersonal force, is compressed in the Devil who in turn assumes the guise of the ubiquitous white overlord. Most important of all, in Ti-Jean himself is the character of the trickster hero, one of the most popular figures in West Indian stories. There to tell the story is also the omniscient narrator of oral tradition. Add to these the figure of Chantal the madman from *Malcochon* (1959) and the cast is prepared for Walcott's most famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

Dream on Monkey Mountain, which received an Obie award in New York in 1970, was begun in 1959 and produced for the first time in 1967. In *Ti-Jean* Walcott found the style of theatre he was seeking. With Makak, the main character of *Dream*, he creates the heroic warrior figure that he missed in the folklore of slave tradition. The model for his fallen warrior is taken from childhood memory:

The person I saw was this degraded, humble, lonely, isolated figure of the woodcutter. I can see him for what he is now, a brawling, ruddy drunk . . . This was a degraded man, but he had some elemental force in him that is still terrifying; in another society he would have been a warrior.²²

At the heart of Makak's dream is a unifying quest motif. The real goal, his birthright, is not realized from the outset because he is distracted by two of the most seductive illusions ingrained in the New World Negro's psyche: the illusions of identity either in European whiteness, or in African blackness. Paradoxically these opposites come to Makak in the mysterious vision of a white goddess who reveals that he is descended from a family of lions and kings. Dream and reality coalesce when she commands him to return to Africa, old and ugly as he believes himself to be. Innocuous as the goddess may seem, there is danger in her very whiteness. Makak is slow to see this, but the audience is made conscious of the danger through the character of Corporal Lestrade.

Lestrade is a mulatto policeman who has been educated into a respect for the white man's law and into contempt for Negro backwardness. As he sets out to recapture Makak and two other escaped prisoners, Lestrade voices his acquired perspective:

There's nothing quite so exciting as putting down the natives. Especially after reason and law have failed. . . . Then I'll have good reason for shooting them down. Sharpville? . . . Attempting to escape from the prison of their lives. That's the most dangerous crime. It brings about revolution.²³

On the trail of Makak, Lestrade's veneer of civilization wears off and he "goes native." A second character, whose

exploits also reveal the futility of assumed identities, is Makak's traveling companion, Moustique. With Moustique, the standard figure of the trickster is introduced. In different segments of Makak's dream sequence Moustique is killed twice. The first time, he is beaten to death by angry villagers who discover that he is a fraud, not the miracle-working Makak he pretends to be. The second time, he is executed by Lestrade on Makak's orders for having betrayed the dream of African salvation. By this point in the play, Makak and Lestrade are both vengeful fanatics: Lestrade because he hates what the history of white domination has done to his self-esteem, Makak because he finds the same corruption and selfishness he wished to escape among his own black followers. Feeling the bitter irony, Makak describes the fighting among his people as "progress." Lestrade calls it the law of the jungle. A third archetypal figure emerges in the person of Basil the carpenter. Since one branch of Basil's trade is in coffins, he serves as a natural death figure. It is appropriate, not only for the action of one late scene but for the theme of the entire play, that Basil is responsible for reading off the roll of all those who stand racially guilty in Makak's dream of blackness. Basil's list, one of the wittiest spots in the production, includes Noah, (but not the son of Ham), Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, Mandrake the Magician, Al Jolson, and others — all of whom are indisputably condemned for being white (p. 312).

Makak's program to rectify history and erase the slate of the past results in the judgment against his closest friend Moustique. As is often the case in West Indian folk tales, the trickster initiates the process of disillusionment which ultimately awakens Makak to the false turn his quest has taken. Moustique asks whether it is not Makak himself who really betrays the true dream of Monkey Mountain. Makak begins with something positive, but now the feeling in the heart is gone, replaced by hatred and revenge. Before he dies, Moustique judges him to be more of an ape, a

puppet, than he was before he dreamed of assuming a new African identity. The white goddess has saved him from his original mistake of seeing himself with a white mind in a black body, but the vision she substitutes becomes equally false. Makak is West Indian, the mixed-blooded descendant of blacks and whites, not purely one or the other. In a momentous symbolic act, it is necessary that he rid himself of his apparition. He must behead the white goddess with his own sword. In Makak's dream, the words to describe the significance of his act are placed in the mouth of Lestrade, the most blatant example of Makak's distorted vision.

She is the colour of the law, religion, paper, art, and if you want peace, if you want to discover the beautiful depth of your blackness, nigger, chop off her head! When you do this, you will kill Venus, the Virgin, the Sleeping Beauty. She is the white light that paralysed your mind, that led you into this confusion. It is you who created her, so kill her! kill her! The law has spoken. (p. 319)

The powerful irony of Lestrade's pronouncement is that, as correct as it may be, he is not fully aware of the deeper implications. The last act ends with the beheading of the goddess, but in the epilogue, with the dream ended and Makak still in Corporal Lestrade's jail cell, Makak has reached the goal of a quest that lies deeper than a man like Lestrade could understand. Lestrade needs an ordered world, a system of law that tells him right from wrong. He will never be free from slavery to one master or another. Makak on the other hand has not only cut through the strings of his white puppet-master, he has also cut the controls of the black master as well. He needs the "Africa of his mind" in so far as it keeps him in touch with his origins, but that is no end in itself as it is for Lestrade. By the final speech of the play, Makak has remembered that his real name is Felix Hobain, and he has found that his true home is back on the mountain.

The branches of my fingers, the roots of my feet, could grip nothing, but now, God, they have found ground. . . . Makak lives where he has always lived, in the dream of

his people. . . . Other prophets will come, and they will be stoned, and mocked, and betrayed, but now this old hermit is going back home, back to the beginning, to the green beginning of this world. Come, Moustique, we going home. (p. 326)

It is not merely racial roots that Makak has found, but generic roots. He is a man, his own independent self, free to begin anew.

As Walcott demonstrates through Makak, the dream is necessary; but it is as conducive to delusion as to revelation. With *Dream*, Walcott culminates the essential West Indian drama that he has been exploring since at least as early as *The Sea at Dauphin*. Fittingly, the next dramatic work he undertakes, *The Joker of Seville*, builds on the foundation of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

The Joker of Seville (1975) is an adaptation of Tirso deMolina's seventeenth-century *El Burlador de Sevilla*. Walcott was commissioned by England's Royal Shakespeare company to re-create a modern version of the legendary Don Juan. On several counts, Walcott is especially suited for just such a fusion of the past with the present, of old and new worlds. He is on record as having said that West Indian artists are adept assimilators; he has experience in bringing together threads of diverse cultures; and he lives in a social context that is remarkably similar to that of Don Juan's Spain. In fact, in *The Middle Passage* V. S. Naipaul draws vivid parallels between places in the West Indies today and Spain in the 1500's:

Slavery, the mixed population, the absence of national pride and the closed colonial system have to a remarkable degree re-created the attitudes of the Spanish picaresque world. This was an ugly world, a jungle, where the picaresque hero starved unless he stole, was beaten almost to death when found out, and had therefore to get in his blows first whenever possible; where the weak were humiliated; where the powerful never appeared and were beyond reach; where no one was allowed any dignity and everyone had to impose himself. . . . (p. 73)

The Don Juan figure is of course legendary. With his established mythic proportions, he provides an ideal vehicle for demonstrating the fact that West Indian experience is

not necessarily as unique as its exotic appearance may suggest. While Makak exemplifies the extraordinary qualities of a humble woodcutter, Don Juan works in the opposite direction: the embodiment of a supernatural impulse, the ultimate in masculine sexuality. Among the components of the Don Juan archetype are the lover, the rebel, the trickster, the Dionysian liberator, and sacrificial god. Walcott does not add to the number of dimensions, but he broadens the field of action to include the New World, and he provides more character exposition than Tirso does. Yet, even though Walcott's Juan is more introspective than Tirso's original, he remains a provocative enigma. An attempt to understand his motivation requires inquiry into at least four central issues: the nature of his quest, the lessons provided by the women he seduces, the parallels drawn between the Old and New Worlds, and the terms of his tragic ending.²⁴

When they are about to board ship for the New World, Catalinon asks Juan what he is seeking. Juan answers he really seeks nothing, but that men want to hear that his quest is for the bitter grail of remorse. Much later in conversation with one of the men he has cuckolded, he elaborates:

I serve one principle! That of
the generating earth whose laws
compel the loping lion to move
towards the fallow lioness,
who in this second, embodied
his buckling stagger, I
fought for that freedom delivered
after Eden. If I defy your
principles because I served
nature, that was chivalry
less un-natural than your own. (II, vii)

From this passage several points emerge. Juan embodies an irrational force: he champions man's urge to obey impulses and to defy prohibitions, such as the one imposed in Eden and those imposed by society; he, as natural man, stands outside institutional values. The terms of his quest require that he use every trick in his arsenal to conquer

each female that he encounters. As it turns out, however, the women he seduces are not enslaved, but are liberated by his violation. The irony of it is that each woman bears some of the responsibility for her fate because of a weakness in her own morality. Isabella and Ana are deceived by Juan's disguises when he enters their chambers, but each of her own volition has invited a man to make love to her. Tisbea in the pride of her beauty disdains all suitors of her own social level, and is thus susceptible to the approach of a gentleman. Aminta allows herself to be won over by Juan's argument that the love of the heart transcends marriage vows (and his argument is not weakened by the prospect he offers of a more noble match).

After long contemplation in monastic seclusion, Isabella comes to see her loss of maidenly innocence in a light remarkably similar to the human freedom purchased by disobedience in Eden. Speaking to Ana and Aminta, she explains how chastity, self-denial, and conformity to the dictates of propriety are denials of life and freedom:

. . . He had taught us choice,
 he, the great Joker of Seville,
 whose mischief is simply a boy's
 has made us women, that is all.

.....
 Listen Ana, don't you see
 that what he's shown the lot of us
 is that our lust for propriety
 as wives, is just as lecherous
 as his? Our protestations
 all marketable chastity?
 Such tireless dedication's
 almost holy! He set us free
 Ana, he taught us choice! (II, iii)

Such hard-earned detachment assuages the grief of Isabella, Ana, and to some extent Aminta, but it does not help Tisbea, who rashly commits suicide when Juan dashes her hopes of upward mobility through marriage.

When Juan first comes upon Tisbea, in what he takes to be an uncorrupted, virgin land, he mistakenly thinks that a pre-Fall Eden may be in the offing. His reaction is bitter when she speaks of marriage and he is bent on love.

A Wife! You calculating bitch

.....
 God you beasts must love your cages!
 Marry a man Tisbea; I am a
 force, a principle, the rest
 are husbands, fathers, sons, I'm none
 of these. At that she shields her breast
 in shame. . . .

.....
 I'm going back on the next ship.
 Old World, New World. They're all one.
 Dammit! I hate a wasted trip.
 Catalinion! Catalinion! (I, vii)

Behind Juan's back, his slave Catalinion has already articulated the plight that is symbolized by Tisbea's European pretensions. Discussing the meaning of freedom with two West Indians he has befriended, Catalinion points out the fatal delusion under which colonial subjects operate. With the opportunity to begin a new life, they have settled for the borrowed role of "free Spaniards." Catalinion warns,

You're watching the rape of the New World, but you're
 too close to notice. . . .

.....
 . . . You have a chance to remake
 things instead you accept them. That's disgraceful. (I, vi)

In his wake, Juan leaves many disappointed expectations and sometimes death, as with Tisbea and Ana's father Don Gonzalo, but one result of his trickery is the revelation of truth. Catalinion, Isabella, and through them the audience, come to a deeper understanding of Juan and of their own humanity. This is their privilege and their reward — a reward not for Juan Tenorio. One of the early songs in the drama carries the choral refrain "sans humanite." Therein lies Juan's tragic fate. As Juan remarks more than once, he is a principle, a force larger than life; therefore, like Ti-Jean's white planter-devil he cannot experience love (II, vii), and he admits that he has no heart (I, x). His eternal siege on maidenhood and authority is fruitless for him, though others benefit along the way. To compound the fatal irony, Juan the arch-liberator is himself a prisoner, trapped in the irreverent role he has always played. When

the vengeful statue of Don Gonzalo summons him to hell, he is ready to go:

You see here a man born empty,
with a heart as heavy as yours;
there's no hell you could offer me,
sir, that's equal to its horrors. (II, vii)

Yet as Juan's corpse is borne off by a stickfighter chorus to an insistent Calypso rhythm, death itself assumes a joker's role: "If there is resurrection, death is a joker, / sans humanite!" (I, vii). Juan's reward, like Makak's, is to become immortal as a dream image. Unlike Makak, however, Juan cannot descend from the realm of the ideal to the mundane tasks of day-to-day living. After his dream, Makak can return to his charcoal burning and his home on Monkey Mountain.

The significance of this distinction should not be overlooked. Walcott's latest play *O Babylon!*, about the Rastafarians in Jamaica, treats another humble man like Makak whose dream of returning to Africa does not materialize. Rufus Johnson, the wood-carver, recovers from despair and is saved at the last moment from suicide in order to realize that faith can outlive a fading dream. He welcomes back Priscilla, the woman who had deserted him while he was in jail:

Me glad you come back. The others gone, but
Me don't envy them no more. Zion is anywhere
a man can stand root like a tree
and believe in him brethren. Now, look your
trowels. Plant anything, gyal.²⁵

Out of endings like those for *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *The Joker of Seville*, and *O Babylon!* it is possible for life to grow. After each failure, man faces the task of building anew. Don Juan is a symbol as appropriate as Prometheus, Satan, or Sisyphus in representing the compulsion of the descendants of Adam to resist any obstacle.

In one form or another, Walcott invariably comes back to the central theme of a spoiled West Indian Eden, and to the central character of the New World Adam. It would

seem that the human implications of the image are practically inexhaustible. Northrop Frye for one sees Adam as the "archetype of the inevitably ironic, . . . human nature under sentence of death."²⁶ Accidents of history may account for the present West Indian situation, but Walcott is to be credited with recognizing in his native islands a microcosm of the contingencies of freedom and guilt, and the existential placelessness of modern man.

NOTES

- ¹René Wellek, Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, revised ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p. 192.
- ²V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962), p. 68.
- ³Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Says," in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 31.
- ⁴Walcott, *In a Green Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), p. 18.
- ⁵Walcott, "Crusoe's Journal," in *The Castaway and Other Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 51.
- ⁶Walcott, "Hic Jacet," in *The Gulf* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 111.
- ⁷Walcott, *Another Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 41.
- ⁸Walcott, *Sea Grapes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 19.
- ⁹T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 153.
- ¹⁰Walcott, "Meanings." *Savacou*, 2 (1970), 48.
- ¹¹A partial list of Walcott's plays to date numbers at least twenty-one. Some of the dates of the following plays are approximate; others apply to latest versions of plays which were written earlier. For example, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was begun in 1959 and not produced until 1967. *Another World for the Lost* (c. 1947), *A Simple Cornada* (c. 1947), *The Matadors* (c. 1947), *The Price of Mercy* (c. 1948), *Flight and Sanctuary* (c. 1949), *Cry for a Leader* (c. 1949), *Henri Christophe* (1950), *Harry Dernier* (1951), *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), *Wine of the Country* (1956), *Ione* (1957), *Crossroads* (1957), *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958), *Drums and Colours* (1958), *Malcochon* (1959), *Jourmard* (1967), *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (Obie award, 1970), *In a Fine Castle* (1970), *Franklin* (1973), *The Joker of Seville* (1975), *O Babylon!* (1976).
- ¹²Walcott, *Twilight Says*, pp. 12-13.

- ¹³Walcott, *Henri Christophe* (Bridgetown, Barbados: Advocate Company, 1950), p. 10.
- ¹⁴Walcott, *Harry Dernier* (Bridgetown: Advocate Company, [1951]), p. 9.
- ¹⁵Walcott, *Drums and Colours*, 7, Nos. 1 and 2 (March-June 1961), 60.
- ¹⁶J. M. Synge, *The Complete Works of John M. Synge* (New York: Random House, 1935), pp. 3-4.
- ¹⁷Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin*, in *Dream . . . and Other Plays*, p. 61.
- ¹⁸Two of Walcott's plays written since his transition to musicals in 1958 make negligible use of music or story-telling — *In a Fine Castle* (for television in 1970), *Franklin* (revised 1973) — but since they break no new ground, they will not be examined here.
- ¹⁹Albert Ashaolu, "Allegory in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*," *WLWE* (April 1977). My information comes from a typescript prior to actual publication of the article.
- ²⁰Theodore Colson, "Derek Walcott's Plays: Outrage and Compassion," *WLWE*, 12, No. 1 (April 1973), 83.
- ²¹Walcott, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, in *Dream . . . and Other Plays*, p. 134.
- ²²Walcott, "Meanings," p. 50.
- ²³Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, in *Dream . . . and Other Plays*, pp. 286-87.
- ²⁴Walcott, *The Joker of Seville*. References to this as yet unpublished play are taken from an actor's typescript. (Act and scene numbers will be noted parenthetically in my text.) I am grateful to Mr. Walcott for his permission to photocopy this work and *O Babylon!*
- ²⁵Walcott, *O Babylon!* (author's typescript).
- ²⁶Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 42.