

## *Walcott's Later Drama: from "Joker" to "Remembrance"*

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**D***ream on Monkey Mountain* (1970) and *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1970) mark the climax of Derek Walcott's mature, professional achievement as a dramatist. He makes, in these plays, his definitive statement on the seminal questions of West Indian liberation and identity. Subsequently (broadly speaking), his drama enters a new phase distinguished by certain interesting new trends, both in content and style. *The Joker of Seville* (1978), and *O Babylon!* (1978), which I have loosely included in this later phase, present various transitional features. The characteristic aspects of the later achievement are most fully represented in *Pantomime* (1980) and *Remembrance* (1980).<sup>1</sup> Both these plays, on which this article concentrates, have been major successes, internationally and locally.

One single effort directs and shapes Walcott's later dramaturgy: he is primarily engaged in working towards greater technical mastery of the stage, a more sophisticated stagecraft. Concurrent with this, there appears a new, inevitable shift in content. The plays present various responses to the post-independence scene, and its increasingly more pressing political and social contexts. Walcott's development has always kept pace with the changing currents in his society, and these new concerns engage him fully. If, as suggested, technical experimentation takes precedence at this stage, the new content is just as powerfully accommodated. It is treated with the kind of intensity and maturity we have come to expect of Walcott. His responses to the post-independence scene emerge as a scrupulous evaluation of change, checking and balancing the society's progress so far. Most remarkably, this is rendered in a new, unobtrusive, well-modulated key.

*The Joker* and *O Babylon!*, the two musicals heading the post-*Dream* output, provide a useful introduction to these later developments. Each presents contrasts which serve to highlight the new trends. *The Joker*, outstanding in sheer theatrical scope, is in fact the culminating point of the characteristic style developed in *Dream*. Walcott's adaptation of the musical form grows organically out of the ritual structure employed in *Dream* and preserves its essential dynamic. That is, characters still function primarily as emblems, the action turns upon an internalized, metaphorical conception of theme, inner experience finds expression in physical enactment, and setting is essentially stylized.

Walcott is adapting, in this play, the story of the legendary seducer, Don Juan. In the Spanish original,<sup>2</sup> he is the libertine who defies the codes of chastity and honour to make the most of it this side of the grave. Walcott's own portrait stresses the principle of moral freedom which Juan embodies. In satisfying the forbidden lusts of his women, he serves to release libido, denied by the prescribed norms of order and decorum. He frees them thereby to face the burden of choice. Walcott heightens the meaning of this quality of freedom in identifying it with the muse of the local creole stick-fighter in whose guise the indigenized Juan appears. The watchword of the stick-fighting tradition, *sans humanité*, is thus adopted to affirm the principle of unflinching courage and affirmative purpose in strife. So that Walcott's Juan comes to personify, above all, that spirit which "can change to elation each grave situation," in the words of the theme song.

The focal point here is that the action materializes out of just this kind of ideation and mythicizing. Juan, although a vibrant personality in the play, is more of an animated force than a character, and action is realized in ritual modes. The plot thus moves through a series of major musical sequences, which present what are essentially moments of spiritual confrontation and recognition. They are enacted in powerful orchestrations of choral and physical performance. Juan's climactic triumph over the dead system represented by the statue-like Don Gonzalo, for example, is extended in a ritual performance of the stick-fight.

*O Babylon!*, his next venture into a full-scale musical, is not so successful. It presents here the interesting case of a work un-

easily strung between the two phases, which partly accounts for its weaknesses. On the one hand, the musical form links it with the preceding phase; on the other, it introduces the preoccupation with the current political, social climate, more subtly explored in *Pantomime* and *Remembrance*. This is, in fact, the only play of Walcott's explicitly and wholly devoted to public protest. The play presents the situation of the Rastafarian sect of Jamaica, oppressed by the corruption of the materialistic Establishment, and in rebellion against it. Walcott is on very solid, topical ground in speaking through a group that have emerged as the rallying point of militant anti-establishment posture, and with the equally strong appeal of an ideology aimed at a radical break with the Western value-system. They are presented in a situation which shows a sympathetic engagement with both their crisis and their revolutionary cause. The group face the threat of eviction from their area, which has been earmarked for a hotel-construction site by the local politicians, who serve American big business. They appear, in the meantime, in a harmonious communal setting, practising their pieties of brotherhood, love, and peace.

The play fails, however, for several related reasons. Many of the flaws show up in the plot itself: a number of issues, not sufficiently centred, seem to be going different ways. The Rastafarians are engaged in resisting the major threat of eviction; they are equally intent on pursuing the latest promise of African repatriation. When eviction comes, they retreat into a mountain hermitage to rebuild their ideal community — a fate which virtually obviates the revolutionary motive, and indeed protest. At the same time, Walcott allows one individual member of the community, his central figure Aaron, a symbolic gesture of rebellion against Babylon. Earl Lovelace, commenting on the play, sees Walcott's Rastas as a powerless bunch, with no clear, constructive direction.<sup>8</sup>

Further indications of the nature of Walcott's failure are to be found in his handling of the musical form itself. In Walcott's hands the form is ill-suited to public protest on that practical plane. It tends to remain wooden and flat in these contexts. By contrast, the play and its musical expression gather momentum

when Walcott renders the prophetic burden of Aaron's act of rebellion. Choral and dance rhythms are engaged to announce the Rastafarian promise of Babylon's Armageddon. He probes the sect's twin doctrines of love and dread, as love, roused by Aaron's "one spark of pity" to dread against injustice, becomes apocalypse. Here Walcott affirms the Rastafarian cause in a vein most suited to his genius, while the attempt at actualization of their purpose lags behind.

To turn to the two works which follow is to be immediately aware of a new kind of artistry and craftsmanship at work. We move away from the kind of production where choreography and musical rendition play a major part on Walcott's stage, with the rich effects and magnificence of total theatre. We find instead, scenes which, shorn of these effects, are contained within much starker, bare, familiar settings. Within this, however, there is a conscious, concentrated effort to manoeuvre artistically the practical mechanics and raw elements of the theatre. Such elements as role-playing, improvisation, disguise, the principle of illusion, the art of acting itself, are adopted as integral parts of Walcott's subject-matter. Walcott exploits them for a double, combined achievement. They become the source of a good deal of presentational content, enriching his stagecraft. They also function as integral motifs and accesses to his themes. To give some idea of the basic drift: in *Pantomime* the two characters are engaged in the act of rehearsing a show. The performance we get consists of a good deal of the theatricality of role-playing, while at the same time the implications of role-playing have a lot to do with the meaning of the play. In *Remembrance*, Jordan's memories transport him to scenes and images of his younger days. Walcott crafts from this situation a presentation which involves a variety of technical manoeuvres: instant transformations of character, doubling of roles, multiple use of props and setting. We turn to a closer look at the plays to see how these approaches are made to serve his peculiar concerns at this stage.

*Pantomime* is played out by a two-man cast: Trewe, the English expatriate owner of a run-down hotel in Tobago, and Jackson, the native black waiter. Trewe conceives of a plan to boost business in the hotel. He and Jackson would devise a pantomime

on the Crusoe-Friday theme. He hits on this even more interesting twist: they should reverse roles, with Friday/Jackson as master, and Trewe/Crusoe as servant. They are in the act of improvising and rehearsing the show. As it happens, Trewe's quip about reversed roles proves all too real. Walcott skilfully turns the comedy, which is prevailingly light, to serious account. The fake situation is constantly tripping into the actual, as the blown-up masks reflect the real-life labels that fix their respective statuses as white boss, black servant. Consequently the fun persistently slips into satire.

The action turns on a constant interplay between fake and reality—the one acting as the touchstone of the other—to expose the postures for what they are. The effect of all this is to bring the men face to face, so that they might meet on some plane of mutual recognition. It is Jackson who emerges with the truer, natural authority. He becomes a solidly grounded figure, whereas Trewe is insecure and despairing, hounded by a past of personal failure. The point of the reversal is not so much the levelling of the former master as rather, it is a stratagem which takes the measure of the native strengths and possibilities to which the West Indian spirit has advanced in post-colonial times. Walcott's larger purpose here, however, entails a review of the master's own burden. The play makes an equally sensitive response to this in Trewe's representative recovery from the failings hidden beneath his role and in his personal rehabilitation. But it is Jackson who leads the way. He takes the lead in directing their curious improvisation; and it is he who points to a new lease of life in the final affirmations of the play.

Walcott shows great skill and artistic resourcefulness in his use of the pantomime convention. This accounts in large measure for the power the play achieves, both in stylistic sophistication, and in the authority with which it arrives at its statements. The play is far from being a "déjà-vu" reworking of the Crusoe-Friday metaphor, and functions on several levels at once. On the most immediate, it keeps the spirit and features of classic pantomime. Jackson's and Trewe's effort involves a series of improvisations, miming of skits resembling clown routines, slapstick effects. For this fare, Walcott draws equally upon the popular backgrounds

of Jackson and Trewe — so that the pantomime songs include Jackson's calypso on "The Good-Friday Bobolee" (II.38-55), and Trewe's racy music-hall song "O Me Wife Can't Cook . . ." (II.222-25). The performance comes over with the variety-package of pantomime and reproduces its sheer theatricality. Beneath this level, as earlier noted, the element of disguise provides Walcott with his central thematic motif. This works to uncover the real-life masks withholding the individual men. Jackson puts it succinctly:

"So both of we doesn't have to improvise so much as to exaggerate. We faking, faking all the time." (II.85-86)

Embracing and linking these two levels, pantomime is the cue for "keeping it light." This watchword is reiterated throughout the play: it is Walcott's cue for making serious comment under cover of light entertainment.

Walcott is thus able to probe several serious, pertinent, and topical issues through what looks like an outdated metaphor — Trewe/Crusoe versus Jackson/Friday. In other words the many ghosts old and new, needing exorcism, vindicate the historical perspective. In invoking this historical context, Walcott is in fact zeroing in on the post-colonial outlook. The Crusoe-Friday syndrome is put to great polemical use. Comedy turns to trenchant comment on both the credit and debit sides of the current scene. In one sequence, Jackson's role allows him to describe the picture of the former master now terrified by the repercussions of his mission as colonizer. He had sought to remake the native in his own image. That image now returns, in the face of the native, as the shadow haunting him, the stigma of his own insecurity. Jackson expresses it thus:

But the shadow don't stop, no matter if the child stop playing the pantomime . . . when he praying, the shadow pray too, when he turn round frighten, the shadow turn round too. He cannot get rid of it, no matter what . . . until it is the shadow that start dominating the child. . . .

And that is why all them Pakistani and West Indians in England . . . driving all you so crazy. (I.402-15)

It is, of course, part of Jackson's strength that he can perceive this, and it marks the distance he has advanced.

But Walcott is no less trenchant in looking at some of the new shibboleths, shadows that have sprung from the break with the older order. In one of the main *Crusoe* routines, Jackson gets set to play the shipwreck scene. He is supposed to play the reverse role of Friday-explorer sighting a white seabird which promises landfall; Trewe is to play the white seabird. They become embroiled in one of those tortuous arguments about who should play what. It ends with Trewe's suggestion that he should be black, really, to play a "white" seabird. Jackson comes back with this hilarious, but loaded, rejoinder:

Are you . . . going to extend . . . the limits of prejudice to include . . . the flora and fauna of this island? (I.625-26)

This brilliantly engineered *reductio ad absurdum* aims obliquely at the extremist doctrines of black nationalism, taking it to its farcical limits. Walcott makes a similar point in another scene when Jackson as Friday-colonizer tries to institute an African language. The exercise collapses into bathos, as Jackson himself is unable to memorize the names he invents. He ends up admitting: "All you win. Long time" (I.491).

The *Crusoe*-Friday polemics reach outward to these larger issues, but it is most active and acute at the personal level where the residual prejudices, stigmas, and defences still separate them as white master and black servant. They are constantly treading on each other's sensitivities. *Pantomime* is a play which bristles with tensions, offset by a racy, robust, verbal humour. The tensions precipitate the two men into confrontation, but as they are forced to face each other as individuals the possibility of mutual recognition and a basis for genuine relations is exposed. It is Jackson who leads the way. He comes with the advantage of having always been the more open, the less hampered by the desire to prove anything. Walcott makes the point in a suggestive dénouement. To Jackson falls the role of uncovering and exorcising the ghosts of the real Trewe: the inferiority complex which has driven him away from a wife who outshone him, and has cost him a marriage and a son. Out of this personal empathy, he tries

to communicate his own positive attitude to his boss, and helps in the recovery of a "brand-new" Trewe.

The portrait of Jackson is, in fact, the outstanding achievement in *Pantomime*, and it is where the final relevance of the play resides. This portrayal quietly and solidly asserts itself through all the twists and turns of the comedy to tower above the entire action. Jackson exudes confidence, assertiveness, and vigour. The native personality behind these traits is captured in his verbal humour, one of the prime assets of the play. Jackson is most truly at home in this native wit and *picong*, which combine positive resources of élan and resilience. It is also a measure of his strength that he is totally at ease on his own ground, with its modest means, and familiar resources and traditions. From all this comes a natural adjustment. Thus, his job as servant involves no subservience and in no way inhibits the man inside. The following speech expresses his characteristic attitude:

I mean, I just call you plain Trewe, for example, and I notice that give you a slight shock . . . You see, two of we both acting a role here we ain't really believe in, you know. I ent think you strong enough to give people orders, and I *know* I ain't the kind who like taking *them*. (II.178-84)

All this constitutes the background to the inner authority and self-mastery that Jackson possesses. Walcott does not impose or contrive these resolutions. They inhere in the core-reality of the master-servant situation. Trewe as master has to measure up to some idea, image of superiority; while Jackson finds a truer access to inner authority precisely because he labours under no such illusions.

Walcott's ultimate aim, in the portrait of Jackson, is to descri and distill the spirit of independence that has been gradually taking root in the region. The latter has come a long way from the images of self-rejection which dominated the earlier drama up to *Dream*. Here he shows the possibilities of a people with "a character and purpose of its own," since, to cite Jackson, "all you leave us to ourselves." Where he looks for and finds it is very significant. He finds it in Jackson's naturalized, creole milieu and roots. It is interesting to note that he totally bypasses the political-radical culture of the current scene. Moreover, his affirmation



gains authority from the solid realism with which Jackson is portrayed. He is well grounded in his grassroots creole origins; in its codes and manners (he boasts of a manliness trained in the Trinidadian Bad-John tradition), and in its pastimes and expressions (he has had his stint as a calypsonian, and in the steel-band). His assertiveness is part of his positive claim in all of these. Jackson, then, is Walcott's prototype of the brand-new man, with the colonial yoke well behind him.

Walcott's approach to and treatment of these timely definitions represent a striking new departure, which appears again in his portrait of Jordan, the old colonial, in *Remembrance*. Moving away from the mythic interiors of *Dream* and *The Joker*, he enters into concrete, naturalistic, everyday settings. This is no conventional use of the naturalistic form: we find the familiar inset into a richly deployed artistry. He makes the following pertinent comment in an article describing the conception of *Pantomime* which bears on the shift in his aesthetic and its import: "Before a Brecht can write a *Mother Courage* that moves us so completely, he hears the mumble of a tough practical widow, determined to make use of the folly of war, before he outlines his thesis on the subject."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the concrete and actual now come first, with the lineaments of the bigger issues taking a secondary place. The traditional proverb played upon in *Pantomime* states the case succinctly: "making mole hills out of mountains." Both Jackson and Jordan are "mole hills" in which the "mountains," the larger issues, define themselves in homely, everyday terms.

*Remembrance* presents the reminiscences of Albert Perez Jordan, a retired, aging school teacher in the neglected village of Belmont, Trinidad. Jordan belongs to that pioneering generation of colonial teachers who have become something of a legend in the region. With their passionate involvement in the classical tradition, they stood for and inspired love of learning, standards of excellence, and discipline. They were the inspiring force behind the first creative awakening of the region, and helped to shape some of its best minds — the true mentors, in fact, of Walcott and his peers. Walcott starts with the explicit purpose of paying tribute to these figures, who are, however, now fading away from

the society, so that his Jordan, hung-up on the classics and "correct" diction, also appears a mere relic in the present-day setting, an anachronism in an era of black nationalism, and standing for all that it repudiates.

*Remembrance* comes over as a brilliant piece of stagecraft. Walcott designs a skilful plot, which accommodates Jordan's reminiscences. Jordan is recording his memoirs in an interview. From the obscure, darkening corner where he sits, we have a replay in which the past comes back "live," the scenes and experiences of his younger days blending in and becoming inseparable from the immediate present. To enact this retrospective process the play uses a good many technical, artful manoeuvres; for example, there are the instant shifts from the older man of the present to the younger Jordan in his heyday in the classroom; there is the doubling of roles, as in the case of the young white visitor that Jordan tries to remake into the image of a lost love. Versatility in acting, modern presentational techniques are at a high premium here. The interplay between past and present leaves the action imbued with the atmosphere of reverie and trance.

The substance of the earlier Jordan's life has already been recorded in two of his short stories (Jordan was the local bard in his day) — "Barrley and the Roof," and "My War Effort." They represent experience reflected in an imaginary, fictional guise, and are used as the basis of the interview. These stories are in effect a paradigm of Memory, and serve to reinforce its thematic significance in the play. Memory resurrects passions, revives ghosts, bringing back the triumphs, losses, and regrets. It takes Jordan into an intense effort of self confrontation and moral reckonings with himself.

From the personal drama unwoven in "Barrley and the Roof" and "My War Effort" we get the portrait of Jordan, his peculiar virtues, and his shortcomings. These depictions bear the stamp of his type and times. "Barrley and the Roof" tells, in the form of parody, of his son's refusal to barter his soul to American patronage, which now overshadows the region. Frederick (Jordan's artist son) had painted a picture of the American flag on his father's roof — a signal for help, to which the American art-

collector, Barrley, promptly responds by offering to buy the roof. This, a satirical comment on America as culture-vulture and on its crass materialism, sounds the dangers of its neo-colonial designs on the region. Frederick's refusal to sell-out stands for the individual integrity and creative standards which are his father's legacy. Conversely, Walcott depicts the inadequacies of the colonial racial inferiority complex which remains one of Jordan's most painful memories, stigmatizing him in eternal self-reproach. "My War Effort" presents this side of Jordan. It tells the story of his courtship of an English girl, Esther Hope, which failed because he had lacked the courage to "cross over the boundaries of his race, even for love."

If such memories chafe, the Jordan of the present lives with further acute, agonizing pain from other sources, but particularly from the loss of a second son in the Black Power Riots some seven years before. (He has been unable to write about this, because he has not yet come to terms with it.) As part of a militant radical group, this son, Junior, was actively opposed to all his father stood for. Jordan remains torn between extreme bitterness and personal misgivings about his death. He rages against the radical militant movement for which he has nothing but contempt, perceiving it as slogan-mongering, hysterical, and destructive. At the same time, he is disturbed by the guilty feeling that his son might have been pushed to these extremes in reaction against his father's Uncle Tom image. Jordan is so confused and so unreconciled to this loss that he has never been able to accompany his family to his son's grave to make his peace with him. This crisis, in fact, is what "places" the significance of Jordan's case: he is the product of the clash between the conservative colonial past and a radical revolutionary era. From the new revolutionary perspective he is dubbed arch-reactionary, and is an obvious target of persecution, against which he puts up a spirited resistance. In the day of remembrances, he alternates between the inspiriting recall of the times when he held forth on Gray's "Elegy" and listening to the sounds of mockery. The strains of the "Elegy" are immediately countered by the persecuting voices:

Gray is ofay, black is beautiful  
 Gray is shit

....

Jordan is a honky,  
 Jordan is a honky-donkey white nigger man! (I.Pro.76-86)

Walcott is concerned to weigh past and present against each other through the representative situation of Jordan. He exploits this subtly in the motif of the father's bequest to his two sons. The one is an artist, adhering to the values of cultural refinement and individual integrity, and vindicating him. On the other hand, he stands accused by the son he has lost to a cause, though a cause he himself repudiates. The issues are complex. On one level, Jordan speaks for Walcott in denouncing the misguidedness and bigotry of bandwagon militancy; but there is a sense in which he is reacting from a position of total intolerance to change, an equal bigotry. Jordan must come to see that anger too can be an impulse of love and hope (although the current showing does seem to foredoom any such sincerity to futile sacrifice). He concedes this indirectly when he tries to come to terms with his son's loss towards the end. Here he admits to a possible misunderstanding of his militant son:

"I've had a son shot in the Black Power riots. I thought he did out of contempt for me — not hope for others — and it has not changed this country. . . ." (II.ii.91-94)

Walcott's Jordan is, in fact, positively oriented in his effort to overcome his shortcomings as a colonial, on this as well as other important levels. He attempts, for example, to make up for racial cowardice in the poignant ritual of saying "yes" to Esther Hope in the person of Anna Herschel, the American hippie who drifts onto his doorstep. Along with the sentimentality, there is grace, courtesy, love of beauty, and all the strengths of the past he embodies. Walcott also hints at the strengths of the present in this episode when he shows the possibility of mutual acceptance between Jordan's son and the hippie. The changes of revolutionary times have gone a long way towards dissolving the racial barriers so rigid in Jordan's time.

*Remembrance*, then, takes an overview of the strengths and

limitations of both the colonial and the revolutionary eras alike. Its dialectic works to affirm a continuity, as it clears the cobwebs of prejudices that divide the older generation from the new. The play recovers and affirms the solid foundations laid by pioneers like Jordan, who ignite the spark of native aspiration, which, despite betrayals, still burns at the most genuine levels of commitment in an era of action. Finally, Walcott's own autobiography is inscribed in Jordan's story. Paying tribute to the kind of mind that helped to stimulate his work, he is acknowledging his own colonial origins. He affirms the contribution of that pioneering generation, and the need to conserve its values and gifts in the ongoing struggle for freedom, though the weapons have changed.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Farrar, Straus & Giroux editions of the plays have been used throughout this paper. Dates of first production for the plays examined here are as follows: *The Joker of Seville* 1972, *O Babylon!* 1976, *Remembrance* 1977, and *Pantomime* 1978.
- <sup>2</sup> Tirso de Molina, *The Trickster of Seville*, trans. Roy Campbell, in *The Classic Theatre*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Anchor, 1959).
- <sup>3</sup> See Earl Lovelace, "Rude Bwoy Walcott," *People* (Trinidad), pp. 37-39.
- <sup>4</sup> "Walcott, Quarrelling Voices in the Playwright's Head," *Trinidad Guardian*, 11 April 1978, p. 7.