

Sharing in the Exhilaration: An Interview with Derek Walcott

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ON SEPTEMBER 23, 2001, Derek Walcott was the Keynote Speaker at the Great Salt Lake Book Festival, an annual celebration of literature sponsored by the Utah Humanities Council in conjunction with Westminster College in Salt Lake City, Utah. This interview took place on the campus of Westminster College before a live audience. Natasha Sajé of Westminster College and George Handley of Brigham Young University conducted the interview.

Derek Walcott was born in St. Lucia in 1930. Since 1948 he has been well known as a major force in West Indian poetry and drama, having written dozens of plays and published 17 books of poetry. From 1959 to 1977 he was the founding director of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He is perhaps best known for his epic-length poetic works *Omeros*, *Another Life*, and, most recently, *Tiepolo's Hound*. He is also an accomplished painter and teacher. He has received, among other awards, a Rockefeller Fellowship, the Guinness Award for Poetry, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Royal Society of Literature's Heinemann Award, and a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award. In 1992 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Currently he divides his time between New York and St. Lucia.

GH: *You were given a very rigorous and traditional colonial education from what I understand, and yet your poetry seems to go considerably far beyond a merely Western expression of poetry. In light of the attempts that you've seen in the United States to balance the need for foundational knowledge of Western culture with the need for a greater awareness and understanding of the diversity of cultures, what's your opinion of how we're doing?*

Well, I'm not an authority on the condition of education in the States. I teach at Boston University, and the people I meet are

graduate students, poets, and playwrights. Talking to the poets at the beginning of the semester, I usually try to find out how much of a background they have in literature, not only American literature, but world literature. And sometimes I am a little disappointed in the limits of their knowledge in terms of a world view of literature. That may be the fault of the system, or it may be the fault of the way a verse is taught, etc., but in comparison to the education that I had, and to the one had in Europe, until American students get to the university, I don't think that they go through the rigor and discipline that is required for a wider knowledge of literature. So, I don't think that there's enough preparation for graduate study in the system. My background was very strict. We did French, English, Latin, and so on, for which I'm very glad. I think any culture which doesn't teach Latin is in peril; I always think that, for lots of reasons. That system may appear to have been too rigid, too disciplined, but I don't think so. I'm glad that I had to do what I did, as much as I may have resented doing it, and I admired the same system when I went to the university in Jamaica (where I did absolutely no studying at all, so that was not an example of anything!). I think the American system leads to a dangerous provinciality that concerns itself strictly with the problems that may exist in this country.

GH: A part of the diversification of the curriculum in American higher education has led to an emphasis on the individual identity of the writer — racial identity, class identity, sexual orientation, or gender. What is your opinion about this? Is this a good thing for literature?

I think you have a tremendous problem in terms of the concept of democracy and education, which this country exemplifies. On the one hand, one wants as wide an education as possible and as equal an education as possible for the citizens of a republic. And this is what this country is: a republic. On the other hand, you have the contrast between a general education and the fact that art, or the practice of literature, really is elite. The conflict is that you cannot democratize genius, you cannot democratize talent and say that as long as one is a writer, or has a right to think, one is automatically equal to the best of any literature. In other words, the right I have to express myself does not make me Shakespeare; it doesn't make

me a great writer. And once you begin to define great, then you get into very hostile territory of people saying all sorts of things, like “you can’t be great writer because you know nothing of women — you’re a man. You know nothing about white people, because you’re black,” and so forth. These are the things that go along with the rights that exist for any group to assert itself in terms of what it chooses, but the eventual decision that is made is not made by any country. It is not made by any system; it is made by time. And time does not democratize; time selects and time says that this is what is good, and this is going to survive, so you cannot turn things around. Now you can get the best possible education for all the citizens of the republic, but you then come across the idea that a great education is by necessity elite — elite in the sense of choice, that what is trash you leave out. And the increase of technology is also an increase in mediocrity because the idea of technology is to reach as many people as possible, and to be as simple as possible in reaching that mass of people. I sound like I’m making a kind of distinction that’s dangerous in terms of dividing the mass from, say, the elite. But that is what the media do: they aim at a mass. It’s as true for movies as it is for any other form of technology. And that’s where the conflict happens in terms of a democracy, and an elite education or an elite literature. By elite, I simply mean the best. I simply mean that while you can consider Shakespeare, for instance, or Dante available to everyone, the intricacy of understanding Shakespeare cannot be taught in mass communication.

NS: *What do you think of feminism?*

I don’t pay attention to it because no matter what you say, you’re gonna get knocked down. You say, “Well, my mother was not a feminist.” Yeah, she was a feminist, because I watched her fight like hell to get the same salary as men. Then you’d say, “OK, so you thought of her as a feminist.” I didn’t think of her as a feminist. I thought of her as a widowed woman trying to keep a decent living together. And she was a heroine to me; I remember her fights. So when somebody discovers the attack on women recently, I say that I knew it for a long time in the example of my mother. I’ve had recent criticism saying, “There are no women in Walcott’s plays!” Why are there no women in my plays? Because their mothers didn’t allow

them to act, that's why. "My mother doesn't want me to come to rehearsal." Now who's the feminist? The woman? Or the girl who is prevented from coming to rehearsal? I'd make absolutely no distinction. I'm angry when I hear distinctions being made between male writers and female writers. I don't want Emily Dickinson to be a woman or for someone to tell me that I can't enjoy her because I'm not a woman. In the same way, I don't want any woman to be told that she can't enjoy Milton. I just think that it's part of a democratic idea where the minority becomes utterly vocal. Black writers have been told, "You're not black enough, and you're not female enough, or you're not whatever enough." And that's just part of the melee that can happen in democratic demands for equality. It's very political, and I just avoid the political solution of art.

NS: *You suggested that great art is timeless, but obviously what we consider good changes according to each era. Our era's notion of great art is different from that of the 19th century. How do you understand those differences?*

Yes, but there are certain things that are invariable, there are certain things that remain. "I wish I were where Helen lies." That little ballad is permanent, it's an immortal ballad. And you can't do an anthology of English ballads without using that. You may be right in terms of taste. For instance, abstract expressionism, which one thought would be the ultimate expression of painting, finally becomes just as faded as Victorianism. But there are centrally, certain things that are permanent. One's argument against their permanence would lead to having to ban them for some reason or the other. There is, I think, an immortality of a kind.

NS: *And what makes something immortal? What constitutes greatness through all the eras? What are some of the qualities that you think makes that ballad survive?*

Well, you might have to pay attention to particulars. I do not think that you can be generic in saying that a great poem is the same thing as a great painting, because you'd be looking at two different things. You cannot look at Velásquez and simply say that his *Las Meninas* is one of the great paintings in history. Why? Well, you'd have to go into detail and say why Velásquez is so great. While some

painters might say that we don't practice Velásquez's narrative style of art anymore, I don't think any painter would say that Velásquez is not a great technician. As to what survives, time is the editor that does that, time is the museum that sorts these things out. Even if initially there are apparently permanent judgments, that are apparently absolute, made by apparently wise people, like critics, or art galleries, or dealers, there are certain things that cannot be altered in terms of their value. It may take a long time for a particular artist to be recognized. What is famous can also easily fade. People who are neglected, or who are not recognized, or who are not even known in their own time, eventually find a level in which their greatness is astonishing to us. I think that's true of Emily Dickinson, for instance, and it's true of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and so on. I think you have to believe that a great work of art will find its audience eventually, even if it takes a century or two; it's almost religious.

NS: *When your collected poems had just come out, you spoke about their weaknesses, and you said that you were working on a book length poem that you thought would compensate for some of their weaknesses. Do you remember, saying that?*

It doesn't sound like me, admitting to a weakness. It may have been a disaster, but not a weakness.

NS: *What can you say are some of your weaknesses, and how have you tried to overcome or compensate for them?*

Well, I've never told this experience to anybody, except for some friends maybe, but at one point, Seamus Heaney, Joseph Brodsky, and I were giving our own work hell and saying how the stuff we write can be reduced to some simple, emblematic thing. I said mine would be, "Wish you were here" because it's palm trees and swimming, like a post card. Seamus said, "Mine is bogs, bogs, bogs." And I forget what Joseph's was, but it was funny. So I'm saying that the weaknesses somehow combine in the strengths, and the joke is combined in that strength. I can't really write about any other landscape with any heart, except the Caribbean landscape. That doesn't mean that I can't attempt to write, or I won't write about the Alps or something. But writing has to do with your

childhood, it has to do with people that you come from, and stuff like that. But it can be emblematically summarized sometimes. So what I may have been saying is to look out for the danger of the powerful, staggering, really staggering, beauty of the Caribbean. I get up every morning, and I turn and look outside of my house to the view, and inevitably I am surprised by the beauty that I see in front of me. It's very difficult to start from that because, you know, you should put your pen down, or close your typewriter, and just enjoy what you're looking at. I don't mean only the physical thing, I simply mean that sometimes if you are surrounded by something that seems inevitable, then you could be working from a concept that is very dangerous to becoming cliché. I may have felt that my work did not go, perhaps, deeply enough into what is the meaning of that physical beauty, and I may have tried to write more to compensate for that.

GH: *Your character Shabine from "The Schooner Flight" says "I am satisfied if I give voice to one people's grief." Does that summarize for you the purpose of poetry?*

If you undertake to cast yourself as what Shelley called the poet, "an unacknowledged legislator," I expect that's ok. If you become an acknowledged legislator, then naturally the danger is propaganda, or vanity. And yet, you have a poet like Yeats, who undertakes the vanity of speaking for people at a certain point, and both the ego of Yeats and the public agony of Ireland fuse. And the sound of Yeats is an astonishing and admirable sound and the conviction in it is also staggering in terms of ambition, in terms of placing himself in that authority. On the other hand, there are people who could criticize the right of Yeats to speak for any people. But Yeats said, "The quarrel with others is rhetoric, and the quarrel with ourselves is poetry." That is a great distinction. So when he addresses Ireland, even if he talks about "I" or the "I" in Ireland, both of them are balanced and true in terms of Yeats's agony of looking at what is happening to Ireland. And some of his greatest poems have come from that public involvement. On the other hand, you have poets who don't say anything directly, but who are very, very much of their country. I think Dickinson is a much deeper poet than Whitman because of her apparent narrowness and her depth of

examining what does not appear to be America as a subject, and yet whatever she is examining is, to me, profoundly more anguished in terms of its being American. It has to do with who she was and where she was, and her isolation, her separation from the public America that was not there. The Americanness of Dickinson, to me, is more convincing than the Americanness of Whitman's broad embrace, and his democratic vistas; hers is more deeply expressed when you understand where she was writing from.

GH: Do you think we allow poetry to have the power of compassion and solidarity that you and many other poets ascribe to it? What prevents poetry from realizing this potential?

There was a time when during the Cold War and before, out of which great Russian and European poetry came, the poetry of Pasternak, and all those other great poets. And you felt that the American poet was suffering from a sort of barbed wire envy because there was no detention, no censorship, and so on. It is a very absurd point, but censorship can create great poetry. What Auden said to do under censorship is to write a very passionate poem about your dog and to hide it because that's really a political poem you're making, but you don't say it directly. But nobody's saying, "Well, what we need is a little more pain, so we can really write more poetry." But the truth that everyday the poet faces is the idea of committed poetry. The trouble is that you can get so divided that you become very particular, in terms of gender, or race, or geography, or wherever you are, so that you have a midwest versus the east, or the east versus the pacific, and that kind of nonsense, as opposed to having something that is broader but which comes out of the particular. The intensity of the particular is what makes it general. What we have, though, is too much of the general trying to be the particular, here in the States. So the danger is that a poet feels an obligation to claim freedom or democracy to be an illusion but essentially wants a fascist state. These delusions are very tempting and lead to a kind of comforting attitude that is very strangely peculiar, for me, for producing poetry.

NS: Can you speak about your paintings in the context of a colonial history?

I've just had two reviews in which the reviewers have said that it's a lot like painting by numbers. But if you went to the Caribbean and you looked at Caribbean light, that's what you'd say, that you have to paint it by numbers. Because you're talking about a primal kind of light; you're talking about an intensity that is incredible. There is a blue that you can't find in your palette. And if you don't have it, how are going to paint the sky? Because that sky that you're looking at does not exist in the watercolour that you have. So if you start out with blue, for instance, the next thing below it is green. And then the next thing below you is white. And the next thing on your left is a red flower. So naturally, I would say, in defence of what I've been accused of, that the whole of the Caribbean looks like painting by numbers. So it's not my fault, and I do mix my colour. But it's painful to take that criticism, and they may be right. Gradation and subtlety are important, but the attitude of imperial authority says that grey is the colour of a culture, of a real culture. Blatant colour, brassy colour, bright colour is associated with underdeveloped cultures, with underdeveloped people. These are places you go to for vacation. You don't take them seriously. You come back from them, and when you come back to winter and snow, now that's serious (snow is serious for me I tell you!). Brilliance and superficiality go together. The south of any country generally gets a hard time for being lazy, or underdeveloped, whereas the north, because it's cold and energetic, is a place where things happen. That's just stupid, but it's true in nearly any culture. It's the conceit of where the centre of a culture supposedly is.

People forget that cultures disappear. They disappear. It's very hard to believe that, you know. Greece has gone, and Rome has gone, and the States will go, and Europe will go. And something else will replace them — it's nothing to lament. It's just part of natural growth and historical growth, which are the same thing. Cultures burgeon, flourish and die. That happens. The thing that one has to fight — and this includes minorities within a culture — is the conviction that the centre of the world is London and Paris or New York and that certain things cannot happen in certain parts of the world. Such convictions are not even prejudice; they are almost religious. But literature proves that that is not so. Because if you're in London in 1500 and said that the best writer in English is

going to come from a place called Stratford, you would be laughed at; it would be absurd. Is it possible for a great writer to come from, say, Pocatello, Idaho? The contradiction of genius is that genius would burgeon from a place that is not supposed to produce it. And that's the reality that the Caribbean imagination has to live with, and the Caribbean imagination, which is a blend of various cultures and one that makes itself separate because of the blending, is what makes me so glad to be a Caribbean writer.

GH: *You were raised by a believing mother, and you've written about her faith in some of your poetry in affectionate, almost envious terms, and yet you've argued that "art is always pagan." Are faith and art always incompatible, or do they need each other in some way?*

Well, theoretically, if you have total faith, which you never have, then you don't need art. If you have faith in the Republic, you don't need poets. And therefore, if the poets are going to criticize the republic, they should be banished. Because the poet should not be someone who looks at the perfection of the republic, of each person in the republic, and criticize what may be wrong with it. Just to plant the seed of suspicion of perfection is really the continued occupation of art. Art is not the enemy of religion, but art may say 'this is not perfection but rather this is perfectibility, the process.' But the accomplishment of perfection? No. This process is continual, and in that sense art is itself religious in terms of self-examination. What I meant by "profane" was that it is not ordained or disciplined in sense of a faith, and "pagan" in the sense that it is outside the order. If you are in the process of trying to perfect a Republic, then you are interfering with the process. And this attempted censorship happens in all countries. What's great about America is it can prevent that from happening by making a lot of noise and criticism. But this is not true of England even, where censorship has happened, or other countries that one can think of, including the Caribbean. There can be enough pressure in the Caribbean that a newspaper editor can get scared of the government and not do something that might make waves or cause trouble. The great thing here is that nobody can stop one from expressing oneself — a really great thing in terms of the achievement of literature.

NS: *Are there other differences between the States and Caribbean culture in the way they either nurture or discourage poets and other artists?*

Well, the obvious thing is race. I mean, it doesn't seem to me that that whole American problem is being solved. It seems to me to be increasing in its simplicity and not in its complexity. The outright, downright hatred of groups seems to me to have increased from the time I first came to America. And it's fairly terrifying. It is so terrifying that it's taken for granted that, yes, this group is going to hate that group. I think, thirty years ago, you were allowed to think something much more optimistic than that, something that was not so dangerous and depressing and desolating. But today it seems to me that it is totally different. The Caribbean, of course, is a place in which there are prejudices, but. . . . Let's say that a black man gets up in the morning and he doesn't have to think that he is working for a white man. We have gone through that; we have gone through slavery and we have gone through the rejection of the idea of a master, and stuff like that, and the subservience that happens mentally — even for a black guy in a suit working on Wall Street, there is still, subliminally, a subservience that he is supposed to observe. And that is still an extension of slavery — and that's no longer there in the Caribbean because there's something, as a human experience, much better developed than in the United States. And it becomes a little more visible in concentrated centers like Trinidad, where all the races are there: the Chinese, the Mediterranean races, the African, and the Indian, and so on. And you see that in daily experience the Muslim and the Hindu are living together. You see not only the possibility but the reality of it in the example of a country like Trinidad. I can't say that's true of any country in Europe that I could go to, not with Kosovo, not with Muslims doing what they're doing, or what anybody else does to the Muslims. That doesn't mean that race isn't being exploited by politicians in Trinidad to create strife, but I don't think it's possible that one would get up one morning and find that Muslims are killing Hindus in Trinidad. The situation could be exploited and can easily be developed into racial strife. But it's not a matter of saying or hoping that one day that democracy can happen, because one has lived with it, and seen it daily, in Trinidad where the

possibility of a genuine adoration of democracy is visible, and experienced. So I don't quite understand why it remains a kind of barren hope in America.

GH: *What do you think of the United States as an empire?*

The ironies are very big. This is a huge country, and it can be very provincial simultaneously. This is a unified country, basically; the idea of America is a unifying idea. And you have territory that can swallow up territory in Europe in terms of scale. And maybe because it is so self-secure, America doesn't need to think like an empire. All the other empires had to think like empires because they had to expand themselves, whether it was France, or Belgium, or Spain, or any one of the European countries that at one time expanded to include places in the New World, or India, or Africa, or wherever. This idea of dominance, of dominating other cultures, is not a part of the American experience of empire. Now you may say that that's nonsense, look at Vietnam. What I always try to remind people when the guilt of America about Vietnam gets very heavy is that it was an inheritance from the French, that it was the policy of France towards Vietnam that made Vietnam happen. That guilt in America is typical of the beautiful sanity that can happen in this country because it can take on the guilt of something that it did not start. I really mean that. And that's not part of any empire; the idea of guilt, of anguish, is not a part of the British Empire, the Roman Empire, or the French Empire — that would not have happened. You would not have had people in the streets saying, "oh, we should not have done that." They'd be saying, "Oh, let's do it, let's beat them." It happened in Argentina recently with the British Empire. That's a residual thing; certain concepts of empire come not from this side of the world's history. But what about Coca-Cola in foreign countries? Isn't that a form of imperial domination, and McDonald's? You could say so, but I'm talking about political issues in which you go to a country and you dominate the people. That's just not part of this country. And this is the case because of the scale of the country, or perhaps because it is self-satisfied and self-supporting, and so on. But that's part of the admirable aspect of this particular empire. The other is that you don't let people last who have ambitions to make it an empire. You

don't let MacArthur last. When he starts to get too Roman, you fire him. Seriously, it's admirable. You get a little guy like Truman saying, "I don't care what you look like. I know your profile looks like Caesar, but you're fired!" It's wonderful!

NS: *Have you ever tried to write a novel?*

A long time ago, it was terrible.

NS: *Why?*

Because poets always do that. They always say, "Oh, it's no problem, I'll just write a novel."

NS: *What makes you able to write book-length poems and plays with epic reach but not a novel?*

The concept of a novel is in a way blasphemous because you really have to play God in a novel, you know? You get up on Wednesday and think, "I'll just kill somebody today." Or, "maybe, no, I'll, I'll not kill them — I'll kill them on Thursday." You can do it in a sentence; you don't have to have a lot of people shooting each other. Once sentence and that happens. I think it's hard to do fiction and theatre. The theatre is a kind of a group instinct. You want to work with people; you want to be in the company with people, unlike the solitariness of the novel, or even poetry. There's no greater kick than if you're working on a play; the pleasure of working on a play is incredible. You're trying to make something together. And that's not there, obviously, in a poem or in a painting, and so from very young, my brother and I had that instinct to work along with other people at school, to work on plays, and to write for a company. And I've been very lucky in my life that I had a theater company that I worked for, for 40 years. I had terrific actors, and the pleasure of working for them was incredible. I was working on a play, we were going on our first tour, we had just done a production of *The Zoo Story* and a play of mine, and there was a terrific actor, Albert LaVeau, who is still around. He is a great actor, not because I'm saying so, but because the critics in New York thought so when he performed in the production of my play in Central Park. This was the first play, other than Shakespeare, done in Central Park. I got some pretty good reviews, but most of them weren't

so hot. But the actor's performance was praised very highly, and the pleasure you have for writing for actors is an immeasurable pleasure. That's why the company was sustained. So after we were going on tour and I had a play called *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, I had cast everybody in it, and then I realized that I didn't have a part for Albert. So I had to write a part in the text that transformed the play into something much better because I had to bring in that actor. Really, it was astonishing. So, you know, I wrote that part for him, and it changed the whole chemistry of the play for the good. That joy has always been a great thing.

GH: *In some of your writings, you refer to other writers in the Americas that you seem to identify as compatriots in a kind of New World literature that is more hemispheric than national in its origin. You have mentioned Pablo Neruda, Walt Whitman, and a number of other poets in that context. Is there something about New World history that grants poets in the Americas a particular type of poetic challenge or possibility that you find attractive?*

It's not so much attractive as inevitable, or destined. I grew up in a very small island that is very, very poor and in which people would be dismissed as being illiterate because they can't read. And yet the language that they talk, and the way that they think, and everything that's true about them is beautiful, and astonishing, and renewing. And they may not understand, even, what you write. But you are really writing because you want to do something that commemorates what they are, and what you believe in. And that's what I was blessed with from the beginning. That's what I knew I wanted to do: to express what was contained in the country and the island that I came from: its music, in its language, its faces, the beauty of its faces, that which is not expressed, not really painted and which is categorized immediately in any white country as being black in the worst sense, as a deprivation simply because they are not trying to be white since if they tried to be white, there'd be a better chance of their developing. That's a fact of criticism, and a fact of history, and a fact of government. And that's the fact that led to the idea of negritude, and the vehemence of Algeria, and so forth. This imperial attitude towards the colonized person doesn't only happen in terms of physical differences, it is an act of suppression of the imagination. And it is a matter of abrupting the imagination

of a young person because what one hasn't got strength to believe in is that the beauty of black skin in a young St. Lucian woman is something that the young, St. Lucian woman, up to a point, still does not believe. She does not believe in that beauty, because that beauty is not found in statues, or in books, or in films, ads, magazines and all of that. It is only recently now that you will see a black model walking on the catwalk. All right, we know all that, and that is ultimately very boring. But when you felt, not that you had a mission to do it, but when you felt that this was there for you to use, then you had no idea of the abundance of your joy, because none of this stuff had been used before. If you were travelling in St. Lucia now, and you come across a ridge, and you look across the mountains, and you see mountains that are very forested, and you say, "nobody has been over there" — it's still virgin, in that sense. So to have that given to you, offered to you, you couldn't do anything else but accept and consider yourself blessed to have. And this is also true of the variety of people that are there in the Caribbean. So the Caribbean is really just beginning as a culture.

GH: How does that connect to the other writers in the Americas?

Well, I think they felt that. I think even Borges feels that. I think that that sense of access is there; something is given and open because of history. It's not just an open gift, a lot of pain has gone into that. That is true of Neruda, and it's true of Octavio Paz and Whitman, though he doesn't say much about the Indians. It's the idea of the New World, but not as an idea of exploration or discovering something, because all that stuff was there. Nothing is discovered in the New World, because people lived in the New World. When the first ships come across, Western society teaches that these people are the pioneers, the people who are going to found cultures, and to teach, and to adapt the natives to their cultures. One has to take for granted the proportion of pain on the other side of the New World and remember that the New World is also very old. The balance that has to be found between the two is in believing that a possibility can happen, a new possibility of something really happening that is not political and is not racial and offers the possibility of sharing in the exhilaration of trying to make a new civilization.