
Paul Breslin. *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Pp. vii-ix, 333. \$20.00 pb.

The canon has been questioned, refuted, expanded until the marginal itself has been canonized. In a line extending at least from Tagore (1913) to Naipaul (2001), the imprimatur of the Nobel Prize committee occasionally draws a writer from the fringes of the mainstream into the arena of popular and academic study. Easy as it may be to reevaluate past judgments and criteria, the selections highlight the transience of taste and reflect the broadening range of aesthetic horizons.

Since Derek Walcott won the Nobel Prize in 1992, a sufficient number of articles and books have been devoted to his work that authors feel it less and less necessary to introduce this St. Lucian poet and playwright to his expanding international audience. Writers are free to pursue specialized approaches and more esoteric theories. Nevertheless, a sensitive reading of primary texts remains interesting and enlightening. Paul Breslin's appropriately entitled *Nobody's Nation* is a provocative explication of selected poems, plays and essays that mark Walcott's artistic evolution. The title derives from Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979): "either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (4). Breslin begins with Walcott's penchant for converting negatives into advantages. Since West Indians are descendants of transplanted immigrants, each must resist the urge to shift from having lost an identity to assuming someone else's formula for personhood. The West Indian community itself is more virtual than actual since the only attempt at political federation for these scattered islands evaporated in barely four years (1958–62). Thus Walcott had to generate his cultural figures from an amorphous environment. His archetypes are disadvantaged personae who had to make do with fragments they found at hand, a New World Adam, shipwrecked Crusoe, wandering Odysseus, the abandoned Philoctetes, along with Makak and Shabine from *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and "The Schooner *Flight*." Breslin's initial contention is that Walcott seizes upon the absence of official history and established tradition in the West Indies, not as an obstacle, but as an opening for creativity (2).

After the chronological overview of the significant events of Walcott's biography for chapter one, Breslin's second and third chapters focus on early plays and poetry. *Henri Christophe* (1949) and *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), *Ti-Jean*

and *His Brothers* (1957), *Drums and Colours* (1958) take their substance from Caribbean life but are shaped respectively by Jacobean, Irish, and Brechtian formulae. Taking a page from Bakhtin rather than Bloom, Breslin correctly ascertains that the influences on Walcott ultimately cancel each other out. As the poet of a hybrid muse writing in the Americas, Walcott's "work must reckon not with a single overbearing precursor, but with a whole range of possible voices, many of which may be heard in the street rather than through the speakers of other poems" (52). It is up to this voracious reader of the masters to temper his "elation and exuberance" at discovering predecessors, to accommodate his voice to the rhythm of his polyglot islands.

In addition to his own perceptive interpretations of specific poems and plays throughout his book, Breslin draws upon a range of critical sources to position Walcott within the postcolonial milieu. For example Roger Abraham's *The Man of Words in the West Indies* (1983) and Richard Burton's *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (1997) lay the groundwork for his conclusion that Walcott's "macaronic" assimilation of vernacular and standard forms is no anomaly. "Walcott was not turning his back on creole culture but following a pattern within creole culture itself, which itself adopts practices of European origin and evolves an 'Afro-American style'" (194). One of Breslin's analytical tools is to punctuate his interpretation with leading questions. Since he equally enjoys expanding Walcott's own allusiveness, I find only one instance of his missing a golden opportunity. In discussing Shabine's faith in chapter seven, instead of simply wondering "how many Trinidadian sailors [... might] have attended Methodist services in the Chisel Street church of Castries, St. Lucia" (211), he might well have recalled Ishmael's account of the seaman's chapel service in *Moby Dick*.

Chapter eight reflects on Walcott's wanderings during the 1980s after terminating his seventeen-year relationship with the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *Midsummer* (1984), and *The Arkansas Testament* (1987) map out a plethora of options that might be debilitating to a lesser talent. Here Breslin's insatiable eye for detail will not allow him to pass up the fact that two pairs of end rhymes in "Old New England" from *The Fortunate Traveller* correspond with end rhymes utilized elsewhere in separate poems by Walcott's influential friend Robert Lowell.

Fortunately, given the present critical climate wherein intertextuality is given priority over any isolated interpretation, Breslin's close reading is leavened with cautious qualifications. For example, in his exposition of the epic *Omeros* (1990) in chapter nine, he prefaces a conclusion regarding Hector and Achilles's reliance on the sea with a critical citation and a tentative "if" (256). Even when he objects to another critic's position, he simply posits an

alternative reading (259). *The Bounty* (1997) and *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000) are covered in chapter ten. Regarding the 26 original illustrations included in *Tiepolo's Hound*, Breslin tempers his reservations regarding the execution of paintings by suggesting that the graphics are not required to measure up to the poetry (285).

In his "Epilogue," Breslin addresses five basic issues regarding Walcott's stature. In answer to those who once charged Walcott with having abandoned the common people, he finds the critical impetus more politically reductive than artistically relevant. Breslin concedes that Walcott may be challenged on gender issues. Rather than mitigate the fact that Walcott's is largely a masculine world by citing the anecdotal refusal of two female Caribbean writers to complain about inequities in his works (288), however, I would rather have seen Breslin evaluate stronger female characters from works touched only lightly in *Nobody's Nation*. Helen is predominantly symbolic in *Omeros*, but there remain Agatha Willett from *The Last Carnival* and Sheila Harris in *A Branch of the Blue Nile*. Third, Breslin addresses the paradox of Walcott's ideological rejection of romanticized "folk" material, while he still evokes "green beginnings" and "Adamic protagonists" in his own works. Taking up Walcott's relative neglect of his people's "nation language" in favor of an elite diction if not overwritten eloquence, Breslin refers once again to historical context. Of course Walcott admires a pantheon of masters in a post-modern period committed to demystifying the apparatus of language itself. Breslin contends that Walcott's eloquence signifies his refusal to conform to a "diminished, timid conception of poetry" (288–89). Finally, in response to the charge that Walcott's mixture of styles, shifts in usage and metaphorical flights defy structural and psychic coherence, Breslin asks, "Why should a Caribbean poet whose entire lifework attests to a sense of multiple origins, identities, languages, and allegiances be expected to produce poetry that subordinates all its profusion to unity?" (291). Fittingly, Breslin concludes not with definitive answers, but by asserting Walcott's transcendence over molds, whether of his own or of others' making.

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