

# Walter Benjamin and a Poetics of the Postcolonial Lyric

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In this paper I propose a relation of affinity between post-colonial poetry and ideas developed by Benjamin in his early work. In its most abstract sense, the post-colonial is a name for certain forms of historical displacement through which a subjected self struggles to relocate itself in space, time, body and language and of similar displacements Benjamin had ample and painful personal experience. In the present context, the argument confines itself to poetry which works out a dialectical tension between the forms of allegory and myth, and my examples are drawn from the poetry of islands, where an island is treated as an abyss into which time falls as history, which it is the poet's task to bridge, as exemplified in the work of Derek Walcott.

For Europe after the Renaissance, the dream of colonization was a myth of progress based on dominative exploitation dissembled as the civilizing mission of Enlightenment. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Horkheimer and Adorno wrote of the 'indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment' as related to the destructive aspect of progress' (*Dialectic xi*).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the era of modern colonialism, progress was experienced, by the complicitous among the colonized, as access to the colonizer's language and culture, although this dispossessed them progressively of whatever had been their original language and culture, thus creating—in the words of Derek Walcott—'one literature in several imperial languages' (*An 15-6*).<sup>2</sup> The subjugation of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity into a unity under the constellation of colonialism provides an ironic parallel in reverse to the process described by Benjamin as the movement of the plurality of languages, through translation, to a pure language' which would be the 'the messianic end of their history' (*SW 257*).<sup>3</sup> Insofar as the post-colonial becomes self-aware of his double legacy of loss-in-gain, he is like Benjamin's angel of history, propelled by the storm of progress 'into the future to which his back is

turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skywards' (*Reflections* 258).<sup>4</sup> For the post-colonial, the debris is less the ruin of a totality from the past than the recession of unified being into the future, a fiction of unity never to be recuperated except in terms of a fragmented plurality. 'I see Africa multiple and whole' (*'Je vois l'Afrique multiple et une'*), wrote Aime Césaire, who grew up speaking Creole as his first language, but wrote creatively in French (*Césaire* 353).<sup>5</sup> In Benjaminian terms, the post-colonial mourns. What he mourns, in this version of the Fall, is the loss of correspondence between himself as the created product of history and the original linguistic culture from which his history has separated him. In Benjamin, man is the namer who gives linguistic expression to the dumb things of nature. In the colonial condition, man splits into the named (who is rendered mute like a thing of nature) and the namer (who, in 'over naming' his Other, displaces the Other's languages by his own). The life of the named, like that of the things of nature, is condemned to mourning because they are mute; they are mute because they mourn: mourning and muteness circle round the sense of abject degradation and guilt brought on by being more an object to be read rather than a subject who can read and name. The post-colonial condition adds a new twist to this dialectic. The mourning ceases to be mute, because it learns to allegorize in the given language, and what it thus demystifies is the myth of origin, including the fable of the fall in which its choice of language traps it.

Thus the melancholic of Benjamin's allegory can be said to correspond to the condition of the post-colonial in a number of relations: 1) the loss of a pure language; 2) the split into plurality, fragmentation, and linguistic secondariness; 3) guilt and muteness; 4) the compulsion to read allegorically what cannot be named unconcealedly. Each correspondence can be illustrated with reference to a poet like Derek Walcott, who reiterates the idea that the things of the world exist in nature more truly when their linguistic being is spoken. One of his poems treats the Caribbean as inconceivable because 'no one had yet written of this landscape / that it was possible' (*CP* 195).<sup>6</sup> In another poem, his boyhood is spoken of as a time 'when I was a noun / gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise' (*Om* 12).<sup>7</sup> The poet is an Adam whose task is 'giving things their names' (*CP* 294), although the poet can also envisage a condition prior to that of being named:

My race began as the sea began,  
with no nouns ... (*CP* 305)

This state of pre-history is imaged as 'the bridesleep that soothed Adam in paradise, / before it gaped into a wound' (*Om* 42). History begins, for the Caribbean, with the shadow cast by an act of overnaming—colonialism. Benjamin claimed that 'Fate is the entelechy of events within the field of guilt' (*Tr* 129).<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the entelechy of names in a field of guilt is what the postcolonial learns to recognize as history. In this condition of fealty, to write is to take the task of naming a self into one's own hands. For the post-colonial poet the task is to find new names for the self. He finds, however, that he can only do this by dis-membering and re-membering the old ones.

The post-colonial in Walcott asks himself a question: 'Who will teach us a history of which we too are capable?' (*Om* 197). The first and enforced—part of the answer is colonialism. What survives as the aftermath of that epoch is the debris of memory, 'History's nostalgia' (*Om* 228). The second—and paradoxical—part of the answer is the difficult task of melting down history, so that life after history can begin, as if before history, in willed acts of memorable forgetting. When Walcott's Odysseus says to Nausicaa, 'The future is where we begin', she asks 'Is this just a dream?', and he replies 'No. A place where dreams are killed' (*Ody* 59).<sup>9</sup> Once the dreams that are the nightmare of history have died, the life of wakefulness begins, in which the poet resumes his Adamic task.

Like Benjamin's baroque, in which 'chronological movement is grasped and analysed in a spatial image' (*Tr* 92), the islands of his native Caribbean provide Derek Walcott, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, with an allegorical image for history in the form of amnesia, which is the ruin of memory: 'All of the Antilles, every island, is an effort of memory; every mind, every racial biography culminating in amnesia and fog' (*An* 30). Benjamin identified the semblance of history for the baroque as the transience of nature in the form of decay (*Tr* 177-78). Walcott uses identical terms for the history of 'the writer's habit' in the Caribbean: a 'sense of elegy, of loss, even of degenerative mimicry' (*An* 5), and 'melancholy as contagious as the fever of a sunset' (*An* 22). Europe had taught Caribbeans to see themselves as 'No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken' (*An* 6). In these *Tristes Tropiques*, 'The sigh of History rises over ruins' (*An* 7). But Walcott refuses 'to see such emptiness as desolation' (*An* 16). In his oppositional dialectic, the figure of ruins is opposed by an antithetical 'delight of conviction, not loss' (*An* 5): 'For every poet it is always morning in the world. History a forgotten, insomniac night ... the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of history' (*An* 27-8). This idea has its analogue in

the notion of 'Messianic nature' developed by Benjamin in relation to the paradox 'of this eternally transient worldly existence': 'the rhythm of Messianic nature is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away' (*Reflections* 313). In Walcott's version of Messianic amnesia, the ocean 'was an epic where every line was erased / yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf' (*Om* 295-96).

The idea of time as the degenerative history of nature is thus resisted by the happiness of the timeless 'reality of light, of work, of survival' in the landscape (*An* 19): 'It is not that History is obliterated by this sunrise. It is there in Antillean geography' (*An* 29). What the islands of the Caribbean offer is 'Not nostalgic sites but occluded sanctities as common and simple as their sunlight'. The poet declares 'I am not re-creating Eden' (*An* 19); nevertheless, he is now again a namer, and 'this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process that the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity' (*An* 11). The necessity of literalness in translation was explained by Benjamin in terms of the 'Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together .... recognizable as fragments of a greater language...' (*SW* 260). The image is echoed by Walcott:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the  
fragments is stronger than that love which took  
its symmetry for granted when it was whole....  
Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered  
histories, our shards of vocabulary, our  
archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces  
broken off from the original continent. (*An* 8-9)

The task of the poet is defined by Benjamin, in the early essay on 'Two Poems by Holderlin' (*SW* 18-36), as having to 'transform the figures borrowed from a neutral "life" into members of a mythic order' (*SW* 28), not to myth but rather ... to mythic connections, which in the work of art are shaped into unique, unmythological, and unmythic forms' (*SW* 35). This is to be accomplished by the mediation of what is called the poetized (or the poematized): *das Gedichtete*. David Wellerby comments that '*das Gedichtete* comes about as an overcoming of the mythic, a negation of the mythic conflict in a structure that brings that conflict ... to rest' (Wellerby 50).<sup>10</sup> The mythic figure of Odysseus might be

said to offer the post-colonial poet just such a form for allegory to negate: the subservience of the borrowing is sublated in what is done with the borrowing. The mythic is taken as if with an aura already worn; which is then reworked into a new recuperative allegory. The depletion of mere borrowing is acknowledged laconically by Walcott (*CP* 297). The material content recovered from the figure of Odysseus is his growth through history into 'this man to whom everything has happened' (*Ody* 80). In Walcott's stage adaptation of *The Odyssey* (1993) the hero is a figure of longing. Through his allegorization, dispossession is retrieved as belonging: 'Our ribbed bodies long for their original shore' (*Ody* 5). His epic involvement in war is dismissed as 'A tower cracking, Troy, Troy! What was it all worth?' He would readily 'give up all this heaving for one yard of earth' (*Ody* 39). The allegorical significance of the passages of Odysseus is explained to him by Athena as an equation between home and peace, 'The harbour of home is what your wanderings mean.... The peace which, in shafts of light, the gods allow men?' (*Ody* 159). While Walcott's *Odyssey* tends toward the literal in metaphorical translation, his quasi-epic *Omeros* (1990) is more fully transpositional. In *Omeros* the mythic is treated anti-mythically, almost as an antidote to the disease of memory, and also as a magical 'exorcism' of Homer (*Om* 294). The persons of the poem are extrapolations:

... I said "Omeros,"  
 and O was the conch-shell's invocaton, *mer* was  
 both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,  
*os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes  
 and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore. (*Om* 14)

What the poet looks for in the structure of events in time is a place of possibility, as something potential which must be realized:

not on this grass cliff but somewhere on the other side of the world,  
 somewhere, with its sunlit islands,  
 where what they called history could not happen. Where?  
 Where could this world renew the Mediterranean's  
 innocence? (*Om* 28)

Odysseus, for the post-colonial poet, is the heroic and tragic figure for the possibility and deferral of fulfilment in whom man will recover nature erased of history, return through narrative to a place where time tells nothing, and the recurrence of the mythic can be disbanded. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno described the nucleus of 'all civilizing rationality' as a form of 'mythic irrationality':

In class history, the enmity of the self to sacrifice implied a sacrifice of the self, inasmuch as it was paid for by a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other men. This very denial, the nucleus of all civilizing rationality, is the germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality: with the denial of nature in man not merely the *telos* of the outward control of nature but the *telos* of man's own life is distorted and befogged. (*Dialectic* 54)

What the poets of the post-colonial condition try to create, as in Walcott, is a renewed dialectical tension between man and nature, and nature and history, which may be described as the denial of a denial, poetry's attempt to reverse 'mythic irrationality' through the antidote of renewed allegory."<sup>11</sup>

#### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming. New York: Seabury Press, 1972.
- <sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1992 (n.p.).
- <sup>3</sup> *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, volume 1 1913-1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> *Walter Benjamin, Reflections: Aphorisms, Essays and Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, tr. Edmund Jephcott. New York & London: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovitch, 1978.
- <sup>5</sup> Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, tr. Clayton Eshelman & Annette Smith. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983.
- <sup>6</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986.
- <sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott, *Omeros*. London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1990.
- <sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, tr. John Osborne, with an introduction by George Steiner. London: Verso, 1977, 1985.
- <sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1993.
- <sup>10</sup> David E. Wellerby, 'Benjamin's Theory of the Lyric', in *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988, pp. 39-59.
- <sup>11</sup> 'The antidote to myth is to be demonstrated in allegory', Benjamin (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1: 677), quoted in Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth', in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, edited by Gary Smith. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 1988, p. 314.

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