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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DEREK WALKOTT:
A SHIPWRECKED MIND

MARA DE CHIARA

In this paper I address Derek Walcott’s *Collected Poems. 1948-1984* and read the persistence of images like harbors, islands, shipwrecks, sails, as the poetic response that the author offers to the uncomfortable questions of cultural identity and language in the Caribbean archipelago, where the brutal experience of colonial enslavement has left a destiny of creolization behind.

It is not my aim here to discuss the theoretical issues raised by the use of the term creolization; excellent critical work has been done over the last decades to express the concerns regarding the “conceptual applicability” of a word whose origins can be traced back to the historical routes violently drawn by European colonialism in the Caribbean islands.¹

Since its first inception in the realm of literary and cultural criticism in the Eighties, as voiced by Caribbean poets and novelists such as Édouard Glissant, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, René Depestre, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, and successively extolled in the renowned manifesto *L’éloge de la créolité* (Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant and Jean Bernabé, 1989), the term creolization has travelled far, disseminating the language of critical theory, with deep impact works such as *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1989), just to name one among many.

The term has rapidly acquired a metaphorical dimension, often losing direct contact with its original geo-historical context, the Caribbean islands

¹ See Hall’s summarizing questions in “Créolité and the Process of Creolization”: “Can the concept of créolité be applied to describe each process of cultural mixing, or is it peculiar to the French Caribbean? ... Do créolité and creolization refer to the same phenomenon, or does creolization offer us a more general model or framework for cultural intermixing? Should creolization replace such terms as hybridity, métissage, syncretism?” (Cohen and Toninato 27).
and their slave heritage, to end up designating the nature of countries and languages where different cultures have come to overlap and coexist side by side, giving birth to new ways of life, new languages and new ethnicities. This ever-existing urge to commingle will never be properly or permanently mapped, given its implicit resilience to any possible cartography meant to fix the amazing mixing of cultures and languages, brought about by the continuous flow of people moving for varied reasons from one place to the other.

Theorists from all origins and languages have turned to the terms creoleness and créolité as necessary keys to their refined reasoning. Homi Bhabha, in the Nineties, for instance, insisted on the short-sighted strategies of nationalistic paradigms in cultural theory, to show the prolific openings offered by a new perspective on the present, whereby creoleness is considered as the inescapable heritage of the globalizing effect produced by European colonialism.²

In the last decades and in more recent times, different metaphorical translations of the term creoleness have contributed to widen the vocabulary of cultural criticism, such as mestizaje (as in Gloria Anzaldúa’s path-breaking Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza, the celebrated 1987 Chicano culture and border theory manifesto); and coolitude (a term coined to discuss créolité in the Indian Ocean).³

In this essay, aware of Stuart Hall’s perceptive comment on Walcott, I do not want to oblige “Derek Walcott to listen to yet another exercise in ‘cultural theory’, which I know he thinks is a tremendous waste of time” (27). Therefore, I will let creoleness emerge but as the hidden, though implicit, landscape nourishing the images of harbors, evoked by Walcott in his poetry and essays, where these very images appear to dispel all sense of hoped-for rest and final salvation, to resonate instead with unexpected elegiac (that is to say, nostalgic, melancholic) tunes.

When Walcott’s Collected Poems. 1948-1984 appeared in Italian translation in 1992 as Mappa del Nuovo Mondo (Map of the New World), I found the Italian title surprisingly apt in pointing that Walcott explores, in this poetic journey, new routes to interrogate our turbulent present. And his routes interpellate our modernity and its colonial heritage.

The maritime expansion of the European empires drew new cartographies which registered the violence of the slave trade in the history of the Caribbean archipelago. Colonialism meant here the slaughter of native populations, like Caribs and Arawaks, plundering and oppression by colonizers from all Europe (Spain, France, Holland, England), whose wealth was due to the slave trade that provided a free work force in the plantations. Slaves came mainly from the coast of the Gulf of Guinea in Africa. When indentured work replaced slaves, Indian people mixed there with African people, European people and natives. The many different populations living there were all in “exile” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 24-27).

This complex cultural mosaic cannot be reduced to the claims of an idealized pure origin, a mythical authenticity (as suggested, for instance, by négritude—the cultural movement inspired by Césaire, Senghor, and others, in the 1930s).⁴ Walcott himself insists on the composite nature of life in the Antilles, and the awareness of inhabiting a melting-pot of different cultures (Walcott, “Necessity” 22-23).

The linguistic fragmentation that took place with colonization, when Spaniards, French, English, Dutch arrived and settled down prevented the development of a single national language. The slaughter of the Amerindian people (one million dead a year, in the thirty years that followed Columbus’ arrival) encouraged the slave trade, and local Amerindian languages (Taino, Siboney, Carib, Arawak) came thus to mix with the African slaves’ languages (Ashanti, Yoruba, etc.) and with the colonizers’ ones (Saracino 116).

Walcott claims for himself the freedom to speak all the different languages he has inherited, because choosing among them would mean self-mutilation: all the mixed accents and cultural aspects cannot be contained within the poor notion of a single racial identity. We can hear this insistence in Shabine, the “red nigger” whose story unfolds in the long poem The Schooner “Flight” (1979):

> I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,  
> A rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes  
> That they nickname Shabine, the patois for  
> Any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw  
> When these slums of empire was paradise.

² See especially “How Newness Enters the World,” in Homi Bhabha’s The Location of Culture. On the inextricable connections of modernity with colonialism, slave trade, and capitalism, following Eric Williams’s 1944 Capitalism and Slavery, see also Ascione, and Mellino and Curcio.

³ See “Coolitude,” no. 234 of the Francophone review Missives devoted to this question (June 2004); on creolization in the Indian Ocean, see the important special issue of Yale French Studies titled Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, and Nomadisms.

⁴ For a basic overview of the movement see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 123-132.
Chapter Fourteen

I’m just a red nigger who love the sea
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation. (346)

This “red nigger” who loves the sea and whose blood is made of a mixture of languages, is not a trick of nature, but the living proof of colonial cruelty. He is the living memory of people who were deported from one place to another. They lost their history and their roots; but they also lost the imagined purity of the language they spoke when their lands, as Shabine says, were “paradise.” In the Antilles, this extraordinary mosaic of cultural encounters is the heritage of the horrible experiences of the slave trade and indentured labor. Yet, this sudden contact among so many different peoples, natives, African slaves, Spanish, French, English colonizers, Indian indentured workers, Chinese and Lebanese immigrants, had some magic. For René Depestre, the Haitian writer, the tragic experience of the slave trade which his ancestors witnessed meant, in a way, also an incredible openness on diversity: it produced a sort of fantastic expansion of their perception. Suddenly, they found themselves in a new world, incomprehensible (qtd. in Gambaro n.p.).

This is the word that the scholar Homi Bhabha insisted upon, in his path-breaking The Location of Culture (1994), a challenging mapping of the contemporary cultural landscape known as “postcoloniality.” At the end of one among his most illuminating essays included in the volume, “How Newness Enters the World,” Bhabha describes Walcott’s poetry as a slow movement of waves in the sea: “And from the little pieces of the poem, its going and coming, there rises the great history of the languages and landscapes of migration and diaspora” (235).

The sea itself, with its never-ending tides, coming and going, symbolizes the hybridity which is inherent to the Caribbean and its creolized cultures. In Walcott’s poetry, as Bhabha comments, the “I” is the bearer of this linguistic and cultural tension, confusion: the “I” becomes the trace for all the mixtures and layers where the memory of origins went lost, leaving behind the utopia of finding it again. If the “I” bears the desire to return to the “homeland,” it is nonetheless the symptom of a permanent exile, an eternal displacement.3

3 The tidal movement already inspired Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s (and Glissant after him) alternative way of envisaging the relationships between time and space and between places and their inhabitants. Opposed to the Hegelian model of dialectical thinking at the basis of Western philosophy, Brathwaite’s tidalectics explores the epistemic potentials implicit in considering “our own location on a

terraceous globe, a watery planet that renders all landmasses into islands surrounded by the sea” (DeLoughrey 2). This deconstructs all myths of origins and arrivals, and considers tidalectics instead as primary epistemic tools promoting “repetition”, never-ceasing movement, perpetual contact. For a more complete overview on the question of tidalectics, see the chapter “Tidalectics. Navigating Repeating Islands”, in DeLoughrey 1-50.
It is the portrait of a shipwrecked man, who keeps his bonfire alive with sparks coming out of his imagination; those sparks are, indeed, "fragments of memory" and "dead thoughts", which, like dried twigs, keep the flame of histories burning, as if to remember that poetry always comes after a shipwreck, some kind of loss, and is kept alive by the dream of a survivor. Walcott's verses are those of a shipwrecked poet, a shipwrecked man, like Crusoe, starving for the vision of a sail, that means his salvation, a harbor to hope for: "The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel/Of a sail," writes the poet in The Castaway, 1965. The sail is always too far away, about to disappear; it represents the promise of a new life, or, maybe, the return to an old land; and the eye that contemplates the sea stretches, stumbles upon the sudden feeling of an abyssal distance, and fades into nostalgia. In The Schooner Flight, 1979, we meet the deluded voice of the poet, who after his vain search for the island that could finally give him a safe harbor, comes face to face with the delusion of an "impossible homecoming":

... I have only one theme:

The bowsprit, the arrow, the longing, the lunging heart—
The flight to a target whose aim we'll never know,
Vain search for one island that heals with its harbor
And a guiltless horizon... (360-61).

The chapter where Iain Chambers describes the new cosmopolitan scenario in postcolonial times, in his 1994 book Migrancy, Culture, Identity, is aptly entitled "An Impossible Homecoming"; here the author is warning us: "These are fragments that remain as fragments" (3):

The belief in the transparency of truth and the power of origins to define the finality of our passage is dispersed by this perpetual movement of transmutation and transformation. History is harvested and collected, to be assembled, made to speak, re-membered, re-read and rewritten, and language comes alive in transit, in interpretation. To talk of this inheritance, to refer to history, as to refer to translation or memory, is always to speak of the incomplete, the never fully decipherable... We

6 The poet, like Robinson Crusoe (and Shakespeare's Prosper, the glorious shipwrecked man of Western literary imaginary), must 'rename' the world again, from the start, using words that he already knows, but as if it were for the first time: "My Crusoe, then, is Adam, Christopher Columbus, God, a missionary... poets and prose writers who are West Indians, despite the contaminations, around us, are in the position of Crusoe, the name" (35-36).

When he wrote the long poem Omeros, 1990, Derek Walcott celebrated an ideal similitude between the Greek poet who sang Ulysses' epic and himself. If the Odyssey ends with the return of the hero it still remains the story of a profound derailment of one's intimate consciousness, of a never-ending interior metamorphosis, of a devastating hangover from all the excesses of our dreams, temptations, obsessions, nightmares and passions. Ulysses returns after too long, too much travelling; he has known Circe, Tiresias, Polyphemus; he has betrayed friends and loved ones. Walcott's poet in Omeros is a wanderer, like Ulysses, and his homecoming is the impossible homecoming of someone who will never be the same person again, and for whom, as Marie-Hélène Laforest notes, there are no roots to look for (35). Walcott is always writing about these themes in his poetry: home and roots, the sea and history, language, identity, nations and belonging, voyages, islands, Ulysses, love, memory. For Walcott, who was born in Castries, in 1930, on the island of St. Lucia, with the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Caribbean on the other, the sea will always be the only measure against which to evaluate, poetically, all human values, the facts of life, and, above all, History, which is a painful notion for many Caribbean writers, for whom their colonial past is still strongly present, with its heavy legacy of isolation and pillaging of cultural tradition:

I, with legs crossed along the daylight, watch
The variegated fists of clouds that gather over
The uncouth features of this, my prone island.

Meanwhile the steamers which divide horizons prove
Us lost;
Found only
In tourist booklets, behind ardent binoculars;
Found in the blue reflection of eyes
That have known cities and think us here happy. (3)

In the desolation of these verses we can hear the echo of Tiresias the prophet, as evoked by T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land. Tiresias represents the seer, who has seen it all, going through it all, through multifarious

7 In T. S. Eliot's verses many Caribbean poets found the proper rhythm for their poetic expression (Saracino 119).
wreckages and earthquakes of soul and body, metamorphic; like Ulysses, and before him, he could descend into the Ades, which means the possibility to acknowledge all that was before. Walcott, like a modern Tiresias, interprets the present, which is overburdened with the weight of the ghosts from the past. The colonial past has robbed the Caribbean islands of their history, replacing it with the scanty pages of booklets for tourists. To speak of history means thus, as Walcott explains in his essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?”, above all, to speak of the loss of history:

You see, the degradations have already been endured; they have been endured to the point of irrelevancy. In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. (53)

Imagination is the only source of creativity, and, because of that, the only source of survival, given this painful loss of history, this incurable wound which has forever deprived those Caribbean communities of their cultural memory. From Trinidad, another writer, V. S. Naipaul, witnesses this “amnesia of the races” in the Caribbean:

No aboriginal Indians now existed in St. Kitts; they had been killed off three hundred years before by English and French; the rough carvings on those boulders were the only memorials the Indians had left. The accessible past was the English church and churchyard—in a tropical setting. . . . The past was also accessible in the eighteenth-century main square, called Pall Mall, of the little town, where newly arrived slaves from Africa were put up for sale after being rested in the barracoons. For one hundred and fifty years in St Kitts the memory of this past had lain dormant. . . . And in the island of Anguilla, even smaller than St. Kitts, not green, less productive, there was another aspect of that three-hundred-years-old slave simplicity. The people of Anguilla were not pure black; they had their own past; they were separated by that past from the people of St. Kitts. The population of Anguilla . . . was made up of a few mulatto clans with British names. They had the vaguest idea of their history, of how they had got to that flat barrenness in the Caribbean Sea far from the big continents, so far even from the other islands; some people spoke of a shipwreck. (147-148)

To invent a shipwreck in order to recreate some historical memory: here, imagination turns into an art of survival, out of necessity; without imagination, there would remain nothing but spite and revenge, as Walcott considers in “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?: “We know that we owe Europe either revenge or nothing, and it is better to have nothing than revenge. We owe the past revenge or nothing, and revenge is uncreative” (51). Walcott considers the past, above all, as a sour story of uprooting and migration: “For us in the archipelago the tribal memory is salted with the bitter memory of migration,” writes the poet in “The Muse of History” (41). This painful, “epic” memory is witnessed by the “illimitable sea” that Walcott recalls in his 1992 essay “The Antilles. Fragments of Epic Memory”:

The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Arawak and Taíno, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory, or the lances of cane as a green prison where indentured Asians, the ancestors of Felicity, are still serving time. (81)

In Marina Warner’s description, Derek Walcott inherits a double uprooting which is the result of forced migrations:

He was born in St Lucia when it was a British colony, and has inherited through his grandparents—both black and white—a double uprootedness: on one side transportation of black slaves from coastal West Africa to work sugar in the British West Indies, on the other, the displacement of those colonists who, to serve the empire, left home, as England was always known, however long those colonial families of empire had been gone. (92)

Walcott’s “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” was delivered in occasion of the poet’s acceptance of the Nobel prize for Literature in 1992. It appears in the 1998 collection What the Twilight Says. Essays. Felicity is the name of the village in Trinidad where the East Indian indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation.

9 Walcott’s “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” was delivered in occasion of the poet’s acceptance of the Nobel prize for Literature in 1992. It appears in the 1998 collection What the Twilight Says. Essays. Felicity is the name of the village in Trinidad where the East Indian indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation.

10 In the chapter “Home: Our Famous Island Race” of her 1994 Managing Monsters. Six Myths of our Time, Marina Warner explores such themes as the myth of national identity; the idea of a supposed purity of origins; history as forgetfulness; the pain of uprooting; the poetical association of Ulysses to Joyce and Walcott; the meaning of belonging somewhere, and the idea of “imaginary
These forced migrations witness the way history works by forgetting, by oblivion: it is like covering up important details of a painting under arrogant brush strokes. Marina Warner recalls the story of the famous painting by Turner, Slave Ship, that John Ruskin received as a present in 1844. The complete title of the painting is Slavers throwing overboard the dead and dying—Typhon coming on, but the drowning slaves are barely visible in the foreground, whereas the greatness of the ship is made immediately apparent, as a symbol of the glory of the British empire. John Ruskin’s appreciation of the painting is merely a comment on the majestic rendering of the deep and boundless sea (65-66). Marina Warner aptly condemns History’s cynicism:

Above all, the painting also communicates the way history forgets: the bodies which aren’t visible any longer will indeed be consigned to oblivion, will be consumed partly by wonder at the paint effects, as in Ruskin’s response, partly by the difficulties later viewers will experience in confronting the story told. (67-68)

Inspired by Turner’s painting, in his turn Guyanese poet David Dabydeen has written a poem where he allows one of the drowned slaves to speak, describing his tragedy:

... no noise
Comes from my mouth, no lamentation
As I fall towards the sea, my breath held
In shock until the waters quell me.
Struggle came only after death, the flush
Of betrayal, and hate hardening my body
Like cork, buoying me when I should have sunk...
To these depths...
... where the sea, with an undertaker’s
Touch, soothes and eases pain from the faces
Of drowned sailors, unpastes flesh from bone
With all its scars, boils, stubble, marks
Of debauchery...

homelands” as formulated by Salman Rushdie in his famous 1983 essay by the same title.

11 In the chapter “Cannibal Tales: The Hunger for Conquest,” Warner explains that the painting was inspired by a true episode of sick slaves thrown into the sea, so that the slave-traders could be compensated for those drownings. There was, in fact, no indemnity for slaves who died from illness. This painting has been also very inspiring for many postcolonial theorists, such as Paul Gilroy and Iain Chambers among others.

I wanted to begin anew in the sea
But...
... my face was rooted
In the ground of memory, a ground stampeded
By herds of foreign men who swallow all its fruit
And leave a trail of dung for flies
To colonize, a tongueless earth, bereft
Of song except for the idiot witter
Of wind through a dead wood.¹²

To History’s cynicism, and to its mute witness, the sea, Walcott offers the marvels of the Caribbean depths, where macabre corals and pearls echo the jewels that Ariel sang in Shakespeare’s Tempest, and then resounded in T. S. Eliot’s Waste Land:

I have seen things that would make a slave sick
in this Trinidad, the Limer’s Republic,
I couldn’t shake the sea noise out of my head,
the shell of my ears sang Maria Concepcion,
so I start salvage diving with a crazy Mick,
name O’Shaughnessy, and a limey named Head;
but this Caribbean so choke with the dead
that when I would melt in emerald water,
whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,
I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea-fans,
Dead-men’s fingers, and then, the dead men.
I saw that the powdery sand was their bones
Ground white from Senegal to San Salvador,
So, I panic third dive, and surface for a month. (348-49)

Almost a single, uninterrupted stretch of white sand, from Senegal to San Salvador, buried under a mute sea, though “so choke with the dead,” the

¹² Qtd. in Warner 79. When interviewed in May 1994, at the Berlin Conference “Migrant Voices: New Literature from Britain,” David Dabydeen linked Turner’s indifference towards the drowned slaves to a sort of voyeuristic enjoyment: “I think there is something very voyeuristic about Turner’s response to all blood and mayhem, in the same way that slavery provided the horror that fed into the neo-Gothic novel at the turn of the 19th century: all that horror and Neo-Gothicism partly fed on the descriptions of slavery, the shark, the broken nigger, the blood” (Häring and Döring 43).
voiceless victims of History come back to haunt, like ghosts, the verses of great poetry, as Derek Walcott writes in "The Muse of History": "it is not the pressure of the past which torments great poets but the weight of the present" (40). And this "weight of the present" does not fade under the effect of the "amnesia" which is "the true history of the New World", on the contrary, it is that very amnesia to make it even more intolerable.

Intolerable is the vision of the horror, through the fogginess of the present; intolerable is the return of repressed horrors, buried perhaps "below deck too deep," as we read in The Schooner "Flight," 1979:

slow, slow, 'cause I couldn't believe what I see:
where the horizon was one silver haze,
the fog swirl and swell into the sails, so close
that I saw it was sails, my hair grip my skull,
it was horrors, but it was beautiful.

and all you could hear was the ghostly sound
of waves rustling like grass in a low wind

every ship pouring like grass in a wooden bucket
dredged from the deep; my memory revolve
on all sailors before me, then the sun
heat the horizon's ring and they was mist.

Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,
our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose,
to hear us shouting. So we stop shouting. Who knows
who his grandfather is, much less his name? (352-53)

That is Shabine's voice, the sailor who tells his hallucinated memories in the beautiful poem The Schooner "Flight." This very moment belongs to the section "Shabine encounters the Middle Passage": it is the infamous Oceanic slave-trade route, and Shabine has clouded eyes, not clouded by the opium-induced visions that Coleridge described in his Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, but clouded by the wailing memories of a faraway past

13 Many scholars have written and theorized on the notion of hauntig in postcolonial texts. Among them, Homi Bhabha, and Toni Morrison.

14 In "The Muse of History" Walcott explains: "In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World. That is our inheritance, but to try and understand why this happened, to condemn or justify is also the method of history, and these explanations are always the same: this happened because of this, this was understandable because, and in those days men were such" (40).

that abruptly slashes the present open, horrendously, to reveal some unexpected beauty—however terrifying—in the sudden return of memory. Still, it is just a momentary return, the clouds are more persistent and enshrine those nameless faces from the past, the ancestors' faces: "Who knows/who his grandfather is, much less his name?" Here we witness the horrific nature of slavery, breeding generations of orphans, the sour harvest of forced migration and uprooting, erasure of origins and families: "All of the Antilles, every island, is an effort of memory; every mind, every racial biography culminating in amnesia and fog." writes Walcott in "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" (82). Colonial history, as Frantz Fanon explained, feeds on this "perverted logic":

Colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (169)

That explains why the past, presented as written history, can be conceived, as Walcott comments in "The Muse of History," as a sort of amoral narration:

Yet the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction. In time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention.

The further the facts, the more history petrifies into myth. Thus, as we grow older as a race, we grow aware that history is written, that it is a kind of literature without morality, that in its actuating the ego of the race is indissoluble and that everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim. (38)

The narrative quality of History reveals indeed its nature of fictitious knowledge, created by the accumulation of events which can be ordered in a sequential chain: this is how power works, imposing order, sequences, exclusions and erasures, triumphs and condemnations. This is how Shabine puts it in The Schooner "Flight":

15 Following Michel Foucault's analysis of History as a narrative act, and of the power-knowledge nexus, much critical work has appeared in the last decades (just to mention two of the most widely known on the subject: Michel de Certeau's The Writing of History, 1988, and Hayden White's Metahistory, 1973). In his chapter "The Wound and the Shadow" (Migrancy, Culture, Identity), Iain Chambers explores in Foucauldian terms many of the issues that are today crucial for the
Yet, in the Caribbean the necessity of imagination, the need to invent anew, is also the only conceivable outcome of the unrest and the fury of the natural elements there. In “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” nature appears as “unnamable”:

We may not even need literature, not that we are beyond it, but in the archipelago particularly, nature, the elements if you want, are so new, so overpowering in their presence that awe is deeper than the articulation of awe. To name is to contradict. The awe of God or of the universe is the unnamable, and this has nothing to do with literacy. (57)

Words, however, cannot fully contain the ineffable magic of Nature, and in their poor attempt at naming what is too much for them, they are challenging gods, and their arrogance is the tragic guilt of “hybris.” Words, in the archipelago, are “blasphemous.”16 Blasphemous was the colonizer, when he dreamt he could translate, in his own language, that foreign and indomitable world, which, like the hurricane described in Walcott’s Hurucan (1981), refuses a name, and rebels against all metaphors:17

... you rage

... you rage

till we get your name right,
till the surf and the bent palms dance
to your tune...

... you abhor

to your tune...

al other parallels

all other parallels

but our own

Hurucan.

You scream like a man whose wife is dead,

like a god who has lost his race,

you yank the electric wires with wet hands.

Then we think of a different name

than the cute ones christened by radar,

---

16 On the notion of blasphemy, in its complex intertextual references to what Walter Benjamin wrote on the task of the translator, see Homi Bhabha’s “How Newness Enters the World” in The Location of Culture.

17 Poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite claims it is impossible to transpose the voice of the hurricane in poetry, trying to subdue it to the English pentameter:

“We did not have the syllables, we lacked the syllabic intelligence to describe the experience of the hurricane, whereas we could describe the experience, absolutely foreign to us, of the falling snow... English had provided us with a poetic model, and it was the pentameter.” Qtd. in Saracino 117.
in the sludge that sways
next day by the greased pierheads
where a rowboat still rocks in fear,
and Florida now flares to your flashbulb
and the map of Texas rattles,
and we lie awake in the dark
by the dripping stelae of candles,
our heads gigantified on the walls,
and think of you, still running
with tendons feathered with lightning,
water-worrier, whom the chained trees
strain to follow,
havoc, reminder, ancestor,
and, when mourning enters, pale
as an insurance broker,
god. (424-25)

Like a furious god, terrible in his rage, Hurucan laughs at man who thinks
he can build his refuges of words and maps, poor strategies before the fury
of Nature, which ignores all sorts of human languages. In Walcott’s
poetry, rain, sea, wind, in their indomitable aspect, are constantly warning
that the search for a safe harbor is bound to fail: the landscape is forever
destroyed and transfigured by the power of Nature, while History
inscribed on it a forced destiny of “creolization.”

Nature as History: these two powerful forces, which in the Caribbean
signify eternal evolution, deride the anxious search for a national identity:
“we have broken up the archipelago into nations, and in each nation we
attempt to assert characteristics of the national identity,” Walcott
comments in “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry” (51). Where history
tried to write its new maps, not caring for those natural geographies, the
very myth of “negritude” as a viable name for one’s identity fades into the
marine reflections of the archipelago, which claims the many colors of its
creolized nature.

From this creolized awareness, the only source of survival: “I had no
nation now but the imagination,” writes the poet in The Schooner
“Flight.” Here, drifting away from the deluded dream of a flag, that could
grant a proper homeland to the wandering man, the poet turns to the lost
ruins of that vast archipelago and sings an epic song for the burning ashes
of his bonfire:

... I am satisfied
if my hand gave voice to one people’s grief.
Open the map. More islands there, man.

Like Homer from Troy’s ashes, Walcott brings back to life the epos
hidden among the ruins of those sleeping Caribbean islands. His hero, in
“The Muse of History,” has wandered among the ruins of cultures and
carries them all in his head: “the man who moves through ruins of great
civilizations with all his worldly goods by caravan or pack mule, the poet
carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered.”
(38)

And just like the poem of the ancient rhapsodist, Walcott’s words
stitch up his people’s lost fragments of memory to compose the epic chant
of the Caribbean archipelago. The Greek word “rhapsodist” is indeed
composed by two words, rhaps, to stitch up, and ode, song. When he
received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, Walcott himself compared
the art of poetry to that of pottery, as we may read in “The Antilles:
Fragments of Epic Memory”; the poet is like the potter, who has to stitch
up together the broken fragments of a vase:

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. The glue
that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that
reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms
whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is
the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting,
they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred
vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. 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. (69)

In Walcott’s A Sea-Chantey, 1962, the schooners, like needles, embroider
the archipelago, stitching one island to the other:

The lithie, ebony hulls
Of strait-stitching schooners,
The needles of their masts
That thread archipelagoes
Refracted embroidery
In feverish waters
Of the seafarer’s islands ... (44)
Walcott is the rhapsodist of an immense archipelago: like Homer, the blind poet, his eyes are blinded by the fog that appears when he thinks he can finally see History and the perfect map.

In the mist of History, the longed-for sail disappears, leaving the poet with his bonfire by the sea, like a shipwrecked sailor, to sing the epic of the New World... on a map of archipelagoes:

Map of the New World
I. Archipelagoes (1981)

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
At the rain’s edge, a sail.

Slowly the sail will lose sight of islands;
Into a mist will go the belief in harbours
Of an entire race.

The ten-years war is finished.
Helen’s hair, a grey cloud.
Troy, a white ashpit by the drizzling sea.

The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp.
A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain and plucks the first line of the Odyssey. (413)

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