Ishaan Jhaveri
ENGL 2050: Contemporary World Literature
Instructor: Dr. Elizabeth Anker
December 7, 2015

An Examination of the extent to which Derek Walcott is divided in his poetics, and what this does for his poetics, through a discussion of "Prelude", "Bleecker Street, Summer" and "The Castaway" by Walcott and "Ode To Autumn" by John Keats

Derek Walcott has authored a vast canon of poetry, carefully built up over roughly half a century. His poetry displays an impressive versatility, clever use of colloquial strains from Africa and his native St. Lucia, and a formidable knowledge of the Western literary tradition. However, coupled with this versatility is a certain dividedness, a certain heteroglossia that pervades his poetics. Walcott clearly wants to be a voice for the subjugated people of the Caribbean, and criticize the colonialism that led them into the straits they are in today. This position must place him at odds with the West and what it stands for, yet his poetry cannot help but betray a keen love of the Western literary canon. He is thus torn apart at having to decide whether he wants to be a sincere and devoted voice for his people, or whether he wants to make his mark on the literary canon he holds so dear. Through his poetry one gets the sense that though he tries deeply to be an absolute voice for his people and genuinely censure colonialism, he simply can't hide his appreciation for the Western canon from his work. His poetry shows the profound lack of control he has on himself to stick fastidiously to being a voice for the people of the Caribbean.

Let us begin this discussion by establishing his sincere intentions to use his poetry to make the cries of his people heard. He wrote the poem *Prelude* as an 18 year old, while he still lived in St. Lucia. Not only was this one of his first poems to gain fame, but also the title *Prelude* suggests that the reader should treat this poem as an introduction to his work, to the themes he intends to tackle through his poetry. He begins the poem pleading the case for *his* "prone island", counting himself among the victims of the atrocities of the British colonizers, but also boldly proclaiming himself as an advocate for the people of St. Lucia (Walcott 3). He confesses himself bitter about how "lost" St. Lucia is to the world, how it is "Found only/ In tourist booklets", how it is a resource for the world to use, admire and

see, but not understand any more deeply than the cursory understanding a tourist booklet would give. He exposes the dormant yet ever present rage among the people of St. Lucia at their treatment by the colonizers, their "variegated fists of clouds". He talks about how as he is on the precipice of adulthood, the "turned doorhandle", he is plagued by these thoughts, and how he will channel his feelings into informing his poetry, he will learn to " … suffer/ In accurate iambics" (Walcott 3). Through this poem Walcott makes the case that he intends to use his poetry as a means to give a voice to the dormant anger of his people.

Yet, written not long after this, we are presented with *Bleecker Street, Summer* about Walcott's feelings on the beauty of summer in Manhattan, from Bleecker Street. A perusal of the poem reveals unmistakable parallels to Western Romantic Poetry. *Bleecker Street* particularly calls to mind the beginning of *Ode To Autumn* by John Keats. "Summer for prose and lemons, for nakedness and languor" begins Walcott, mimicking Keats' *Ode* that begins "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, /Close-bosom friend of the maturing sun;/Conspiring with him how to load and bless/ With fruit … " This is reminiscent of Keats not only because the clear connection in theme: both invoking the beauty of the natural world by paying tribute to a beautiful season, but also because of the iambic, musical rhythm (Walcott 40; Keats). Both poems evoke very similarly the contented lethargy associated with these seasons, and use it to speak favorably of them. Keats's poem is explicitly called an ode, but particularly later in Walcott's poem when he talks of "music opening and closing, *Italia Mia,* on Bleecker" one really feels the musical cadence in this poem too, and would not disagree were it also explicitly called an ode (Walcott 40). Keats talks of Autumn's beauty by comparing "her" to a woman, describing her "[her] hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind", and Walcott similarly talks of "undressing" an unnamed subject in the "summer heat", which could easily be interpreted to be the summer itself. Thus, Walcott explicitly imbues in this poem the distinct style of the English Romantic tradition. In doing so, he is swayed into also talking about similar themes as the English Romantics

like Keats did, which were very different from the themes of protest he set out to write about in *Prelude*. Thus we see a dissonance in Walcott's work: in *Bleecker Street* he lets his literary imagination abound, and writes about the beauty of a summer in Manhattan, in the West, shortly after confessing his bitter feelings about Western colonialism in *Prelude*. This Walcott is completely at odds with that Walcott, gaily neglecting to acknowledge that there may be some hypocrisy in his writing such a poem. Yet, there is a sense that this Walcott is wholly under the influence of his severe admiration for the Western canon, he isn't trying to undermine his position in *Prelude*, it is just that he control his love of the Western canon, and cannot control when tributes to it erupt out of his pen. Thus, Walcott presents a divided persona to the reader.

One of the poems that encompasses this profound best is *The Castaway*. Reading it one is strongly given the impression that Walcott is almost forcing himself to stay on the path of sincere protest on behalf of the people of the Caribbean, but try as he might, cannot complete a poem without some display of his considerable command over the Western canon. In *The Castaway* one is presented with a vivid, aggressive account of the plight of the people of color of St. Lucia, and the Caribbean in general. One unquestionably sees that Walcott intends for this poem to align firmly with his intention of using poetry to expose what the imperialism of the white man has done to his people. However, on closer reading, Walcott's internal strife in the writing of this poem is exposed, and one can see that it is very difficult for Walcott to keep himself from referring to the Western canon.

Let us first examine the aspects of the poem that indicate that Walcott clearly intended for this to be a voice for the plight of the people from St. Lucia. Immediately reminiscent of the plight of these people is the title, *The Castaway*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "castaway" as something or someone that is thrown away or rejected, or the state of being shipwrecked (OED Online). Through the use of this polysemous word, Walcott evokes in the reader an understanding of the state the British colonizers left the people of St. Lucia in, cast away from their native Africa, wrecked without a home.

He achieves this affect also through the rhythm of the poem, written in free, jarred verse that mimics the plight of a sailor cast away at sea, on a choppy ship, or an African slave being shipped to the Caribbean. The first two stanzas capture the feelings an African slave may have had on first entering the sailing ship: “The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel/ Of a sail.” His “eye” is starved, both because of his innocence of the sea and anything beyond his native Africa, and because he is probably starving as a result of his poor treatment and limited access to food aboard a slave ship. He is looking for the “morsel” of a sail, to try and find some semblance of understanding in the vast ocean of uncertainty he has been cast into, but instead, he is merely castaway without a morsel of understanding or of food (Walcott 57). “The horizon threads it infinitely” he doesn’t know the plight awaiting him all he sees is an infinite horizon (Walcott 57). The next few stanzas fluctuate between longer and shorter lines varying from seven to twelve syllables, which mimic the motion of a sailing ship.

The diction in the poem shows the care Walcott has put in to including colloquial strains in this poem. Many of the descriptions are vivid, and even disturbing. Many of the sights are described as African slaves would understand them. The plants and insects in the poem are largely described in colloquial terms, calling seaweed “salt green vines”, comparing the slaves’ feeling of their own brain rotting to a “yellow nut”, describing the myriad of insects that plague the slaves in their quarters informally “sea-lice [and] sand[flies]”. The tone of the diction he employs for other descriptions shows the immense brutality of the slaves’ experience aboard the ship. He talks about their having to experience “dog’s feces drying” in front of them, suggesting that they probably share quarters with the animals on board, and have to make do with the animals defecating in their quarters. The poem ends with a comparison of the driftwood of the once ship to a tightly clenched “white … hand”, this creates the dual effect of showing the desperation with which these slaves try to cling on to what they know and not get cast away to anonymity, until their very hands are white. It also underscores that this plight has come about at the white hands of the white man.

He also attempts to remove overt references to any aspect of the Western canon from the stylistic elements of this poem. *Castaway* is free verse and does not have a particular rhyme scheme or rhythm. By making it so, he ensures himself not guilty of associating directly with any stylistic subset of the Western canon.

Thus we can see Walcott vividly evokes a tale of an African slave violently taken from his home, and shipped away to a land he doesn't know, cast away from the things he holds dear, his home, left alone seeking solace that he cannot find. Walcott is thus indisputably successful in evoking the horror of being transplanted from one's home to a new place, and then being subjugated in this place. In this capacity he is a powerful critic of colonialism, achieving through his poetry what he set out to achieve in *Prelude*. Yet, deeply enthralled by the Western canon and unable to hide his appreciation of it, Walcott cannot keep himself from being associated with it. "We end in earth, from earth began. /In our own entrails, genesis." Walcott writes (Walcott 57). One cannot ignore the blatant reference to the Bible in these lines, specifically the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis talks about man being born from the Earth, and through this reference perhaps Walcott is talking about the future of the African slaves that were brought to the Caribbean, that they now have to make do with being sons of a new Earth, against their will, according to the will of colonizers attempting to play God. It is clear that Walcott criticizes the actions of the colonizers but does so by invoking a reference to the Bible, a Western construct, and something that is rigidly intertwined with the Western canon of literature. He effortlessly employs it to make his point, but by doing so also situates himself in the Western canon, and cannot help doing so.

He also makes reference to a "babel of sea-lice, sand-fly and maggot" mixing references. On the one hand he employs colloquial diction to evoke an African slave's understanding of his own plight as discussed above, but on the other hand he ties these things together by collectively referring to them as a "babel". The dictionary defines "babel" as a confused noise, and here Walcott is cleverly referring

to the story of Babel in the Bible, where God caused people to speak different languages so they would not understand one another. Here too he uses a Western reference effortlessly, to achieve multifarious effects. On the one hand, he criticizes the British for forcing this babel on the slaves of Africa, forcing a situation on them that they do not understand. On the other, he is referring to his own poetry – that though he yearns to speak for these people, and to these people, he cannot because he is speaking a different tongue: that of the Western canon.

Thus one sees Walcott's internal struggle. He does sincerely attempt to dissociate this poem from being considered part of the Western canon by imbuing it with a lot of colloquial strains, and ensuring the style is discontinuous with any movements in Western poetry. Yet, in the very act of noticing Walcott's efforts to mark this poem independent of the Western canon, one becomes guilty of associating him with the Western canon. One can only identify aspects of his poetry that differ from the Western canon, and always looks for aspects that don't. His determination to mark this poem apart from the Western canon is only apparent because of how naturally one sees poems like *Bleecker Street* being written by Walcott, because one sees that when he doesn't battle with himself to prevent himself from doing so, he will always naturally recourse to writing in the Western literary tradition. Even in this poem, in which his struggle to mark himself apart is so apparent we see references to the Bible, that clearly serve to enhance the appeal of his poem.

Thus Walcott proves unable to write convincing poetry that really says what he wants to say, without recoursing to the Western canon to enhance his writing. It is as he forewarns us in *Prelude*, "Until … I came upon you, my/ Reluctant leopard of the slow eyes" (Walcott 3). He says he will try and write poetry to expose the voice of his people, but will only be able to stay true to that as far as he can, till he, like the leopard that is considered a symbol of fraudulence in Dante's *Inferno*, finds that he cannot truly express himself without the Western canon. It is clear that he too understands this himself,

yet cannot do anything about it, as he expresses through his references to Babel and *Inferno*. It is not incidental that he uses Western references to express his dividedness.

Thus in Walcott's poetry we are presented with this heteroglossia. He doesn't know if he is a sincere voice for his people, or just a "hack" that has "changed himself [and] his language" as he admits in *Codicil* (Walcott 97). He cannot express what Western colonialism has done to his people without invoking Western Literature, and this plagues him throughout his poetics. Yet, as we have mentioned before, he is well aware of his own sense of dividedness, and many of his poems focus on this very aspect of his life. While this essay establishes evidence for this specific conception of his dividedness, a further area of significance to now discuss, that was only somewhat touched upon in this essay could be the ways in which Walcott himself deliberately comments on his own dividedness

Works Cited

1. Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems*. Noonday Press, 1994. New York.

2. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. http://www.oed.com/

3. Keats, John. *Ode To Autumn*. http://www.bartleby.com/106/255.html