

The Search for Genesis in the Castaway and Other Poems

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ABSTRACT

If *In a Green Night* Walcott grapples with isolated acts that coalesced into his delineation of the dilemma of his personality, in *The Castaway and Other Poems*, he attempts to situate the persona of *In a Green Night* in a landscape. To do this, Walcott creates a mythic history of the Caribbean personality by intertextually appropriating the Crusoe/Friday experience of Robinson Crusoe. This becomes necessary after he has domesticated all his influences and emerges with a desire to seek its style, to write verses as crisp as sand, clear as sunlight, cold as the curled wave, ordinary and as a tumbler of Island water. This desire is evidenced from his youthful vow never to leave his island until he has put it down in words. One of his earliest impulses then, is that of a chronicler, recorder or diarist writing about a new and unexplored world.

INTRODUCTION

In this way, and in this sense of isolation, the poet adopted the mythical figure of Robinson Crusoe as interpretive of the situation and condition of the Caribbean personality which emerge from the history of slavery and colonialism. As Katie Jones observes,

Crusoe is the literary figure who lurks in the background of The Castaway, as the title itself suggests. Crusoe's island, in Defoe's novel, is topographically similar to Walcott's ... Crusoe's situation, as lonely castaway, is similar to Walcott's, as a lonely and embittered poet. (38).

In addition, the poet, with his mixed ancestry, is both Crusoe and Friday, master and slave. As a Caribbean, the poet can be seen as a castaway from both his ancestral cultures, African and European, stemming from both, belonging to neither. To salve this split, Jones observes that Walcott creates a castaway who is a new Adam whose task is to name his world. (38).

Walcott describes the many masks of his Crusoe thus:

My Crusoe ... is Adam because he is the first inhabitant of a second paradise. He is Columbus because he has discovered this new world, by accident, by fatality. He is God because he teaches

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himself to control his creation, he rules the world he has made...("The Figure Of Crusoe",35-36)

One important issue that the poetry of The Castaway emphasises is the synthesis that Walcott achieves in the collection. Art and History are brought together in the poet's synthesizing vision of Landscape. In "The Almond Trees", Walcott demonstrates how both art and history are implied in the landscape. The "twisted, coppery" trees are identified with the sunburnt bodies of women lying on the beach, and in the poet's imagination, become the seared writhing bodies of slaves brought from Africa. In addition, the trees are witnesses to the pains, sufferings, and survival of the Caribbean personality in history. Thus, the whole poem therefore becomes a veiled reply to the detractors of the Caribbean –the Froudes and the Naipauls- a negation of the idea that there is "no visible history" there. Walcott asserts that everything is a silent witness of the past, even "this stand/of twisted, coppery sea-almond trees"

Intertextually, Walcott links this poem with the myth of Daphne who metamorphosed into a laurel tree as she flees from being raped. This allusion, especially in the context of the fiery heat of the sun on the beach, brings to mind the sufferings endured on the middle passage. It reminds one of the people of the Caribbean who were raped, exploited, and enslaved yet who survived.

The principal idea behind the castaway is the presence of a void, of desolation. To fill the void, the Caribbean man must have his own genesis, his creative beginning. It is necessary to have this genesis because of the condition they have inherited – no tradition, no spiritual heritage, no myth to build on. The poem presents the castaway image of one contemplating the seascape, hungry for company, emphasizing the loneliness of the castaway:

the starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel
of a sail. The horizon threads it infinitely,(p.9)

This loneliness, coupled with the vastness of the sea breed inertia. This condition enhances the schizophrenic nature of the castaway. It particularly creates an exile mentality, the desire for another world in the castaway. Such a mentality, negates the desire for "genesis".

For Walcott, the ability to overcome this mentality will create in the Caribbean the desire to see the islands as home and fitting for growth: "If I listen I can hear the polyp build" (9) This inertia gives rise to growth, to creativity as a result of his desire to contemplate his landscape with a compassionate heart. This imposes on the poet the decision to "abandon" what he calls "Dead metaphors" (10) His ways of expression, his mode of comparison, has to give way to the present situation of a castaway. It is only by abandoning the former mode of seeing things that he can adopt the metaphor from his new world. In other words, the castaway has to shelve his attitude to the society by abandoning his solitary or hermitic stance.

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By doing this he is able to perceive what is happening in the cosmic, that there is indeed, creativity. This contemplation of what is happening in the cosmic helps the poet to start his own creation. It releases him from the frustration of “a wrecked ship” (10), of chaos and loneliness to a revitalization of his creative energy.

This is the poet’s vision for the Caribbean man who should move out of the circumstances of history, move out of the contemplation of nothingness and fear that is associated with the castaway, and examine the landscape of his island. Only then can the Caribbean man not only “hear the polyp build” but can “make thunder split” (9). Only then can the Caribbean man understand the essence of the New World by being a new Adam with the New World to possess.

This poem recreates the thought and actions of a person isolated from others. Eyes that have not looked at another human being since the shipwreck search the sea for any sign of a soul. The empty horizon is endless. The use of the first word “starved” shows the intensity of the loneliness of the castaway as he hungers for human relationship. In this poem, Walcott selects the calm lonely sea-side and suspends all activities as action would bar the material serenity required for exercise:

Actions breed frenzy. I lie,
Sailing the ribbed shadow of a palm,
Afraid lest my own footprints multiply...
The salt green vine with yellow.
Trumpet-flower.
A net, inches across nothing.
Nothing: the rage with which
The sand fly’s head is filled
Pleasure of an old man:
Morning: contemplative evacuation,
Considering. The dried leaf, nature’s
Plan... (The Castaway, 9)

In this state of physical inertia and loneliness, and in this contemplative mood, the poet like an old man, broods over a number of natural phenomena: the dried leaf’s impending fall to yield the fertility with which the mother-tree would produce green leaves independent of the fallen leaf, and the sight of dog feaces which ‘crusts’ and whitens like coral”. Through the image of coral, Walcott is implying a need for gradual societal development in the manner the coral builds. The new world, according to him, should be built step by step by the West Indians themselves without extrinsic influence. Hence, neither the social values left behind in Africa nor the European civilization would come into this new creation.

This illustration of elemental creation is further illustrated in two lines, “we end in earth, from earth began in our own entrails, genesis”. These words derived from Genesis 3:19 which forms part of the biblical account of

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the early history of man. “For dust thou art and unto dust thou shall return”. Similarly, the poet sets for his creativity in the first five stanzas in tune to that preceding the creation of the world, “and the earth was without form, and void, darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved on the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

This elemental creation in silence or solitude provides the basis for the creation of a mythodology for the New World, which involves the creation of a New World and a new vision to substitute the contemporary and past unsatisfying ones. The poet’s reaction to the building of a “polyp” in stanza eight becomes a source of inspiration for him to carry out a similar exercise. It is as if he is asking: if the polyp can build on its own through this process why not we?

If I listen I can hear the polyp build,
The silence twanged
By two waves of the sea.
Creaking a – sea louse, I make
Thunder split... (The Castaway, 9)

Thus, inspired, the poet wrenches himself of inertia and becomes “Godlike”, abandons the “dead metaphors” of history, the feeling of damnation and loss, to begin a similar creativity. The vocabulary used in the poem is unpleasant, beginning with “starved”, concerning with “afraid”, emphasizing boredom and tiredness, the sense of nothingness, the body waste, “evacuation”, and “faeces”, the infestation of “sand flies”, “sea-lice”, and “maggot”, the “choked” and the “nailed” hand. These words go to emphasize the torture, suffering and pains of loneliness and solitude that plagued the castaway.

In “The Swamp” the poet contemplates the environment and comes up, naturally, with the feeling of chaos, of fear, of mystery and of course nothingness ‘It begins nothing’ (11). He sees a landscape of rot, of fungi, of disease. He sees a landscape of violence and bloodshed:

Behind its viscous breath, the very word ‘growth’
grows fungi, rot.
Each sunset takes a swear of your life’s blood.
Fearful, original sinosities! Each mangrove sapling
Serpentlike, its roots obscene
As a six-fingered hand (11)

Such a landscape creates nothing but horror and fear. Creativity cannot be effective in such an atmosphere of chaos. Walcott’s view of the landscape moves from a negative outlook to a positive one.

Behind it visions breath the
Very word ‘growth’ grows
Fungi< rot; while mottling it root.

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More dreaded than care brake, quarry,
Or sun-shocked gully-bed
Its horrors held hemming way's
Hero rooted
To sure, clear shallows.
It begins nothing limbs of
Cracker convicts, Negroes.
Its black mood
Each sunset takes a smear
Of our life's blood. (The Castaway, 11).

In these words we find a contradiction of Walcott's creative spirit that we saw in the image of the "coral the God-like creator" and the "polyp" in the "Castaway" which shows a possible gradual self-development in the New World. Here, the poet states categorically that the swamp, which represents the West Indian landscape "begins nothing", thus ruling out all possibilities of artistic creation of the landscape. This view of the landscape as chaotic is further manifested in Walcott's other images as in these lines:

Fearful, original sinuosities
Each mangrove sapling
Serpent-like, its root obscene
As six fingered hand...
The speckled vulva of
The tiger orchid;
Outlandish phalloi
Hunting the travelers
Of its one road... (The Castaway, 11)

Images in these stanzas combine to depict the landscape as a mysterious scene with lurking dangers and unnatural phenomena such as "serpent like", "roots obscene", "six fingered hand", "outlandish phalloi", and "speckled vulva" are indications that the unproductive nature of this "swamp" is not likely to change for the better unless these rooted obscenities are removed to stop reproducing their own kind. Furthermore the last line "haunting the travelers of its one road" re-emphasizes the choicelessness of place for the Caribbean and the perpetual insecurity in the landscape. Here Walcott is pessimistic about growth, creativity, and productivity in the Caribbean.

This the poet specifically examine in the poem "Air" which appears in The Gulf collection. He presents a landscape of violence, of destruction, of fear and of underdevelopment.

... this rain forest
not merely devour all
but allow nothing vain...(The Gulf, 36)

The landscape witnessed the destruction perpetuated by the historical presence of the whites.

... they devoured
two minor yellow races and
half of a black:
[they] devoured.
The god-refusing Carib...
And the Arawak

There is too much nothing here. (The Gulf, 37).

These metaphors of fear, chaos and destruction, as the poet suggests in “The Castaway”, have to be abandoned because of the “widening amnesia” (12) that the castaway, that is, the Caribbean man eventually surrenders to. The effect of this amnesia on the society is effectively expressed in “Laventville” (p.32)

However, in “The Almond Trees” Walcott projects a concept of Caribbean history which places in perspective the negative view of history as portrayed by V.S. Naipaul. To Naipaul, “history is built around achievements and creation and nothing was created in the West Indies”. (27)

Walcott thus begins the poem by emphasizing a mode of perception which is not profound – a stress on emptiness, on nothingness evidenced from the physical landscape:

There's nothing here
this morning...
no visible history (36)

Looking at the landscape there is loneliness, emptiness except for “twisted, coppery, sea-almond trees” (36)

This apparent lack of history comes from an inability to perceive a linkage between the natural and the physical landscapes for as the poet observes, the almond trees have not only witnessed the pains, sufferings and survival of the “middle passagers” but have shared in their pains, sufferings and importantly survived:

The fierce acetylene air
has singed
Their writhing trunks with rust, (37)

For the trees, like the human beings, have had “their brazen sheen/ from fire” (39) Now “their bodies shine”/They’re cured,/they endured their furnace” (37). This endurance and survival of the Caribbean in their environment is what the poet celebrates in addition to the linkage and the relationship between man and the landscape:

Aged trees and oiled limbs share a
common colour” (37)
[They are] welded in one flame (37)

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Thus for Walcott, an understanding of this relationship, and the essence of survival is what history is about. The physical landscape, like the human, has suffered and has survived. This linkage reveals a perspective to Caribbean history that answers Naipaul's view of history. History lies not in the evidence of monuments but in the suffering and survival of the physical and human landscapes. It is such linkage that produces compassion.

This theme of suffering and survival as history is taken up again and again in Walcott's poetry. In "The Sea is History" (The star-Apple Kingdom, 25) he provides evidence of monuments, battles and martyrs in the people during the great crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. History lies in the deaths and survival of the slaves during the middle passage: men, women, children, packed like sardines. It lies in suffering in their excrements and petrifaction: "there were the packed cries/the shit, the moaning" (25). It lies in the many dead slaves thrown over board the slaveships and their "bones soldered by coral to bone" (25). History abounds in the degradation of the people daily, in the nature of their identity, their pains, humiliations, ancestral deaths and survival. To Walcott these are evidence of history written on the pages of the sea which determine the position of the Caribbean in today's world.

In "Laventville", appropriately dedicated to V.S. Naipaul, Walcott takes a critical look at the nature of society that emerged from the Middle Passage. Here the poet's emotion is not held in check as in "Ruins of a Great House" by mere intellectual logic. His analysis of his society bears a stamp of what compassion can exhume from the soul's depth. He sees poverty among the black settlement. The society still to a large extent reflects the legacy of History:

The middle passage never guessed its end.
This is the height of poverty
For the desperate and black (33).

"Laventville" is one of the most powerfully written of Walcott's poems in The Castaway collection because of its compassionate look at a society that bears the terrible stamp of history: the history of slavery, of pains and of sufferings. The poem takes the form of a journey uphill by the poet to a child naming ceremony. As the poet climbs, he surveys the settlement and sees vividly the legacy of the history of slavery: he sees the poverty and degradation of the blacks:

... the inheritors of the middle passage stewed
five to a room, still clamped below their hatch,
breeding like felonies. (p.32).

The poem can be thematically divided into three parts. The first part is from the beginning of the poem to line 37. The second is from line

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38 to 80 and the third part from line 81 to the end. The first part emphasizes the sufferings, the pains and legacy of poverty from the middle passage to which the inhabitant of Laventille are still tied:

Climbing, we could look back with
widening memory
On the hot, corrugated iron sea.
Whose horrors we all share. (33)

The second part takes up the issue of survival as the essence not only of history but a fitting legacy, the quintessential gift of history to the new generation:

And climbing steeply past the wild
gutters, it shrilled
In the blood, for those who suffered, who
were killed,
and who survive.
What other gift was there to give
As the godparents of his unnamed
child? (p.33)

The gift of the people's spirit of survival, and of compassionate link with their landscape becomes the fitting legacy for the new Caribbean personality. The third part takes up another Walcottian concept of history which is the concept of amnesia. As the poet contemplates the events of the christening ceremony, it becomes obvious to him that their problem is the effect of the amnesia of history. Walcott passionately recalls:

something inside is laid wide like a
wound,
some open passage that has cleft the
brain
some deep, amnesiac blow. We left
somewhere a life we never found,
customs and gods that are not born
again,
some crib, some grill of light
changed shut on us in bondage, and
withheld
us from that world below us and
beyond
and in its swaddling cerements we're
still bound. (35)

To Walcott, the slaves, the indenture labourers that populate the New World gradually succumb to amnesia. It is this amnesia that gives birth to the people's genesis in the Caribbean and initiates adaptation to and linkage with the new environment for survival and growth requiring a

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positive outlook to their landscape. This can only be effective when there is that understanding or awareness that they have left behind a life they will never find. For it is futile to seek a world that has suffered an amnesia.

Then Walcott adopts the Crusoe image in ‘Crusoe’s Journal’ as a fitting metaphor for the Caribbean world and creates a mythology for the relationships in the New World. Thus, the Caribbean man is shipwrecked in the island, he ventures inland, surveys his new world, armed with survivals from the shipwreck and “the bare necessities” found in the island.

Even the bare necessities
of styles are turned to use,
Like those iron tools he savages
From shipwreck, (51)

The Caribbean man finds himself confronted with the Adamic task of naming and “blessing some sea-rock” “in a green world, one without metaphors” (51). Metaphors have to be created from a known culture and here Crusoe takes a missionary posture – “he bears/ in speech mnemonic as a missionary’s” (51) and transforms Friday, the savage, and by extension the other races, into good Fridays “who recite His praise,/ parroting our master’s/style and voice, we make his language ours” (51) Ironically, Crusoe is seen here as a missionary determined to master the world he finds himself and thereby defining and fashioning the reality of others: “All shapes, all objects multiplied from his”. (51).

Thus by intertextually linking his work with Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Walcott aims at creating a new world mythology-a mythology of individual creation which stresses the need for determination on the part of the people; to create, and possess a positive outlook towards the Island.

“We learn to shape from them, where nothing was” (52). In ‘Crusoe’s Island’ the mythology of Crusoe becomes that of Adam, having his Eden, the New world, to possess. The poet, however, sees the hermitic stance of Adam as negating growth, progress and procreation for although “upon this rock the bearded hermit built/His Eden” (55), he lacks the joy of companionship. This “Sent him howling for a human voice”, longing for “human love” (55). This need for companionship becomes the Elixir that spurs the castaway, the Crusoe, the new Adam, to developing his New World.

The Castaway and Other Poems ends with a vision of love for his society. In spite of the nature of his Island, its littleness and being a “colonial backwater”, the poet has preference for his Island:

... I preferred
The firefly’s starlike little
lamp...

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to the highways brightly
multiplying beetles (59).

Although events taking place in the island create a bleak future like watching “the best minds root like dogs/ for scraps of favour” (61) he categorically asserts his rootedness: “We are not yet lost” he stresses, “we belong here” (59). This assertion is a product of a compassionate mind and an acceptance of history.

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