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# The Use of Myths in Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems* 1948-1984

In his *Collected Poems*, Derek Walcott resorts to mythological episodes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as from the Bible and lesser known Amerindian sources. Refusing to choose between what is often considered as conflicting origins, he seeks to initiate a dialogue between these various cultural references. In the more recent volumes of the collection, the poet increasingly hesitates between the use of metaphor and of the epic and the ideal plainness of an honest craftsman.

**T**hough Derek Walcott uses myths – mostly allusions to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – throughout the *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, these references are not the most visible aspect of his creation. In his early works, Greek mythological figures appear as metaphors or comparisons almost on the same level as others pertaining to the natural world. Increasingly, the story of Odysseus serves to articulate the poet's wandering existence, his conception of his art and the difficult question of homecoming.

In literary criticism, one cannot merely adopt the same approach as anthropologists, who consider that myths are those sets of representations thanks to which the members of a particular culture account for their origins and the foundation of their customs. Such an anthropological approach implies that the cultures studied have myths whereas 'developed' civilisations possess histories and legal systems, and master scientific reasoning. Postcolonial theorists have criticised this distinction which presupposes a questionable hierarchy.

A writer can adapt existing mythological systems, but can also be a myth-maker. Jungian critics have attempted to define representations belonging to the collective unconscious, a notion which is so ideologically loaded that it seems difficult to apply, particularly to writers from cultures outside Europe. Other theorists such as Charles Mauron<sup>1</sup> have tried to use the notion of 'personal myth', combining Jungian concepts and more classical psychoanalytical methods. Roland Barthes has offered an even wider conception of the term which has little to do with traditionally consecrated meanings: for him, any object can attain the status of a myth provided it is appropriated by a number

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Mauron, *Des Métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel. Introduction à la psychocritique*.

of people. In his 1957 essay 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui', Barthes considers that myths endow things with some sort of simplicity and essentiality.<sup>2</sup>

In 'Origins',<sup>3</sup> one of the early poems in the collection, Walcott evokes myths (in the etymological sense of 'muthos', which means 'story') about the genesis of the Caribbean: traditionally in Europe, the starting point was Christopher Columbus's so called 'discovery' of the Americas in 1492. The *persona* admits to having learnt about 'Hector, bridler of horses, / Achilles, Aeneas, Ulysses', all heroes of the siege of Troy as told in the *Iliad*. About the Amerindians who occupied the Caribbean on Columbus's arrival, little has remained in colonial history, just the questionable notion that their 'primitive minds cannot grasp infinity' (p. 11). So far, the *persona* seems to have merely absorbed the myths (in the sense of dubious information) transmitted by colonial education.

Still, the poem suggests an older starting point, the birth of the narrating 'I' as 'foetus of plankton' (p. 11). This origin is linked with the sea, which could echo the discoveries made by biologists studying evolution. This could equally refer to a form of oppositional myth developed recently in the Caribbean: because ancient history in the region cannot be found in written documents, perhaps it can be reconstructed from an imaginative reinterpretation of the land and of sea voyages and the remains to be found at the bottom of the ocean.

In the 1950s and 60s, Caribbean artists naturally tended to identify the exploration of the mysteries of language with that of the enigmatic Caribbean beginnings. Just as the missing signified remains as a black hole to many poets, the impossible search for origins and the violence which surrounded the ancestors' arrival in the islands provided a natural field of speculation.

For Walcott, who was followed in this by many other Caribbean writers,<sup>4</sup> the sea is history of a particular kind. Therefore the poet's *persona* could declare that, by the sea, the mind 'sees its mythopoeic coast' (p. 14). The poet created a personal myth of origin which was to become popular among later Caribbean and postcolonial<sup>5</sup> poets. The idea of being born nameless is Walcott's way of referring to the Caribbean people's particularly complex ancestry: because the slaves were cut off from their origin and transported into a new part of the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Le mythe ne nie pas les choses, sa fonction est au contraire d'en parler ; simplement il les purifie, les innocente, les fonde en nature et en éternité.... En passant de l'histoire à la nature, le mythe... abolit la complexité des actes humains, leur donne la simplicité des *essences*...' Barthes, *Œuvres complètes* I, p. 854.

<sup>3</sup> All our references are to the 1986 Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *Collected Poems 1948-1984* and are inserted directly in the text.

<sup>4</sup> E.K. Brathwaite with his poem 'Coral' (*The Arrivants*, p. 232-234) and Fred D'Aguiar with his novel *Feeding the Ghosts* in particular.

<sup>5</sup> The Samoan writer Albert Wendt uses similar representations in his eponymous epic poem 'Inside Us the Dead' (*Inside Us the Dead. Poems 1961 to 1974*, p. 7-14).

world, their history is one of loss and alienation. Yet, instead of stressing this loss, Walcott suggests that their identity lies in their spiritual integration in the natural environment rather than in a consecrated historical tradition.

In 'Origins', the tragic Middle Passage is sublimated through the evocation of human beings born out of the submerged skulls of the coral. In this way, the *persona* identifies his imagined beginnings with those of life on earth, an evolution from simple unicellular beings living in sea water to the more complex structure of human beings. This enables him to assert the deep bond between the ocean, the island and its inhabitants. Thus his history merges with that of nature, creating an epic representation of humanity presented as an alternative to the self-flagellation of Middle-Passage representations. The *persona* opposes what he learnt of his origin through episodes extracted from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the missing stories about the Amerindians, the islands' first inhabitants whose memory remains like the blank pages of a book turning in the wind.

In Section II of 'Origins', the poet mentions his natural tendency to interpret Greek myths learnt at school in terms of local equivalents. Thus the caduceus, the magic wand made of two intertwined snakes round Hermes' staff becomes 'the constrictor round the mangrove' (p. 12). The sibyl is an old black woman who 'gibbers with the cries/of the Guinean Odyssey' (p. 12). The sea is 'like Penelope's spindle,/Ravelling, unravelling its foam' (p. 15). Though the characters or episodes chosen are a source of wonder because of the fantastic stories they refer to, they generally have equivalents in the poet's own experience: the sack and burning of Troy may evoke the 1948 fire of Castries which destroyed Walcott's native town. The mythological echo is reinforced by the fact that St Lucia was known as the 'Helen of the West Indies', a reference to its changing colonial masters thirteen times during the fight between French and English for the possession of the Caribbean islands. The figure of Ulysses returning home exhausted and unrecognised, bringing with him images from far-distant lands, appears in Section VII. He, too, is a creature of the sea and nobody pays any attention to him. In Walcott's later poetry, his figure increasingly becomes a metaphor for the wandering creator who suffers from exile and from lack of recognition when he goes back home.

Metaphors drawn from the *Odyssey* are used regularly to give meaning to the seascapes and landscapes of the Caribbean. In 'A Sea Chantey', the palms are the '[s]haft of Odysseus' and the volcanoes are called 'Cyclopic' (p. 44). The scene in 'Two Poems on the Passing of Empire' is 'complete' (35) when a heron perched on a stump in the marsh reminds the *persona* of the emblem of a Roman legion.

Walcott generally uses mythic figures which are part of the literary heritage of the Western world. This has been considered by some critics as a sign

that he is a slave to the former colonisers' culture. Yet, for an artist who has sought throughout his life to combine, even if, at times, with difficulty, the different cultural hoards at his disposal, it is only natural that he should turn to the Greek and Latin literatures that were so much part of his education in the West Indies in the 1940s. Walcott disagrees with those Caribbean people who deliberately choose one part of their heritage (generally the African component) to the exclusion of all others.

The poet's desire to explore the eclipsed past creatively speaking occasionally takes the form of voyages into the Amerindian heritage about which very few material traces remain. In Chapter 12 of *Another Life*, the narrator exclaims: 'Where else to row, but backward? / Beyond origins, to the whale's wash, / to the epicanthic Arawak's Hewanora, / back to the impeachable pastoral' (p. 217). The poet gathers fragments of memories about the earliest inhabitants of the Caribbean after they travelled from Asia through the Behring Strait.<sup>6</sup> 'Hewanora', literally the land of iguanas, was one of the Arawak names for St Lucia.

In several of his poems, Walcott takes up an episode relating to the Amerindian past. In 1651, a group of Carib Indians from Grenada, besieged by French forces, preferred to jump to their deaths off the cliffs rather than surrender. This historical event has become a myth illustrating the Caribbean people's heroism and pride in the face of more powerful invaders. Walcott alludes to these 'Sauteurs' in several of his poems, particularly in *Another Life*, Chapters 11 (p. 213) and 21 ('I leapt for the pride of that race/at Sauteurs' [p. 281]). The narrator in *Another Life* expresses conflicting feelings towards the Sauteurs whose name appears after a long series of glorious 'battles not our own' (p. 212), whose enumeration passed as history. The military history of Empire figures prominently in the young artist's memories. Several poems evoke the grandeur of the conquest of Africa or that of the 'Fifth', the Fifth Regiment of Foot based in Castries, whose reputation was a source of wonder and became a sort of local myth.<sup>7</sup>

The military exploits of the empire were so engrained in colonial education that the narrator in Chapter 11 of *Another Life* feels as though he were pounding the bodies of these Amerindian ancestors back into the mud from which they have emerged.<sup>8</sup> Again the question of creation is evoked through the metaphor of clay being fashioned. The narrator appears to have difficulty accepting the Sauteurs' existence. Yet in the next stanza (Stanza 2, Part IV), he uses the first person plural 'we', thus signifying that he identifies with the

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<sup>6</sup> 'epicanthic' is a rare word referring to the Mongolian fold of skin of the upper eyelid.

<sup>7</sup> See *Another Life*, Chapter 11, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup> See p. 213, beginning of Section IV.

mythic Sauteurs. Only then can he perceive their heroism in terms of light and illumination, while comparing them with the Greek soldiers trying to contain the Persian invaders at the battle of Thermopylae.<sup>9</sup>

An evocation of a destructive hurricane leads the poet to invoke Hurucan, the old god of the winds: 'we remember you as the possible/deity of the whistling marsh-canes'. He does not bear being confused with 'the northern messenger/whose zigzagging trident/pitchforks the oaks like straw' (p. 424), possibly an allusion to the Greek god Zephyros. He is not like Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder brought over with the slaves: 'you abhor/all other parallels/but our own,/Hurucan' (p. 424). When the hurricane abates, Hurucan is relegated to the status of an artefact like 'the Carib arrowheads, / the pin-pierced amulets' (p. 426).

In 'Exile', the poet, remembering happy memories from Trinidad, evokes the Indian monkey god Hanuman (p. 102). Yet the philosophy according to which one follows 'the Path' is seriously endangered as the Path unrolls 'like a dirty bandage' (p. 102). The pages of the *Ramayana*, the epic which tells of the exploits of Hindu mythical heroes, simply serves to 'stoke the mulch fires'. The ancient narration is reduced to a Bollywood production as the narrator sees the episodes 'jerk[ing] past like a cheap film' (p. 102).

The presence of this Indian community in Trinidad is stressed in 'The Saddhu of Couva', a poem in which, according to the narrator, speaking in Creole, the old gods and the Indian tradition are said to be dead: 'There are no more elders / Is only old people. // Suppose all the gods too old, / Suppose they dead and burning them' (373). The Indian girl met along the road in Chapter 12 of *Another Life* is the 'new Persephone' (p. 219), perhaps an allusion to the fact that this girl is viewed as a creature of darkness, in the same way as Persephone was the goddess of the underworld. At that stage, the poet remains on the periphery of a civilisation which is familiar to him but to which he does not really belong.

Besides Greek references, the Christian mythology of Genesis, Adam and Eve, the Fall, the Ark of the Covenant, the Exodus, and so on are used to explore the creative act. In *Another Life*, the narrator takes up 'Adam's task of giving things their name', an adaptation of the mission given to the first human being in the garden of Eden. This is reinterpreted in the light of Alejo Carpentier's romantic conception of the New World artist.<sup>10</sup> The assumption was that the New World had only been named (improperly) by the colonising powers. Consequently any act of repossession implied that one should name

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<sup>9</sup> See p. 214.

<sup>10</sup> See p. 189. See my discussion of this motif in Walcott's poetry in *Derek Walcott, Collected Poems*, p. 140. I have also studied the implications of Carpentier's conception in *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse*, p. 104-110.

the world using terms more appropriate and more native to the environment. The creator thus replicates the original act of naming which makes things exist, a conception in which the artist becomes almost a replica of God. Considering oneself as a New World Adam giving local things their name is also a post-independence myth which helped the Caribbean people to liberate themselves from colonial representations and gain self-confidence. Yet it may also appear as a form of romantic longing, for one cannot merely ignore the names and history that were the result of colonisation.

*Another Life* is the central work in which Walcott attempts to turn the Caribbean heroes of his youth into mythological figures. In Chapter 3, the narrator recites his 'alphabet of the emaciated' (p. 164). Starting with 'Ajax' and concluding with 'Zandoli', he enumerates the colourful local characters who are often associated with episodes of the *Iliad* or of the *Odyssey*. The man who lights the lamps in Castries in the evening is said to be carrying 'Demeter's torch' (p. 158), a reference to the attribute often associated with the giver of grain in Greek mythology. Pretending to answer the teacher's question 'Boy! Who was Ajax?' (p. 158), the narrator mentions a local horse that bears the name of the Greek hero in the Trojan war. Most of these odd but fondly remembered characters perform very menial tasks (Berthilia's son, who carries his crippled Cassandra of a mother on his back, is a night-soil man). Castries, where all these people live, is called 'Troy town' (p. 162). Choiseul, the chauffeur, closing the garage door, is said to be banging 'Troy's gate shut' (p. 159). Darnley's brother, who is blind, evokes 'Homer and Milton in their owl-blind towers' (p. 160). The young poet who watches them pretends that he too is blind, thus hoping to acquire the genius of these creators by romantically associating their greatness with their handicap. Emmanuel Auguste, 'ex-merchant sailor', is a 'lone Odysseus' whom the author, parodying the 'rosy-fingered dawn' in the *Odyssey*, 'rows alone through the rosebloom of dawn' (160). His journeys now have a different dimension, since he simply crosses the harbour 'defiling past Troy town'. Janie, the local whore, is called 'Helen'. Ligier, a 'reprieved murderer', is 'tangled in his pipe smoke' like the Trojan priest Laocoon, who warned his compatriots not to let in the wooden horse, and who was strangled by sea snakes.<sup>11</sup> Auguste Manoir, the rich businessman is called Midas (162). By identifying these simple characters with mythical figures, Walcott gives them a heroic status corresponding to the elevated one it occupies in his childhood memory. At the same time, he practises a form of gentle self-mockery aimed at putting into perspective his tendency to turn every inhabitant of Castries into a local myth. As the narrator concludes at the end of the chapter, 'they were the stars of my mythology'. Here the word 'mythology' is used to refer to a private pantheon which

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<sup>11</sup> See Vergil's *Aeneid*.



is both important, because it enables him to give value to a world which was often despised, and also clearly overstated when considered from the distance which age has given him.

Already in *Another Life*, Walcott suggests that his turning the local people into heroes may be an exaggeration. The narrator offers an excuse at the beginning of Chapter 7 of *Another Life* when he states that 'provincialism loves the pseudo-epic' (183). The value of these characters remains, even though they may appear at times not quite worthy of their mythical counterparts. At other times the narrator resents his own love for the epic. In Chapter 12, he longs 'for a future without heroes' (p. 217) with only simple human beings at their daily chores. Yet, in the next sentence, he longs 'to make of these foresters and fishermen / heraldic men'. The aim is not to avoid heroes altogether but to glorify the simple people at their daily tasks.

The artist's impossible integration in a meaningful environment was also complicated by Walcott's belonging to the educated Methodist English-speaking middle class which was naturally separate from the majority uneducated 'patois'-speaking Roman Catholic population. Walcott's early poems often express his propensity to turn the poor into some kind of myth in which they are viewed as closer to the land and to the essence of the landscape. The visionary scene in Chapter 7 of *Another Life* (see pp. 184-185) provides an example of this. Though the poet's *persona* immediately acknowledges his tendency to romanticise their condition, the urge to turn them into myths remains strong.

Most of the myths used by Walcott in his poetry are literary myths which he adapts to his purpose. In 'Crusoe's Island', the poet's stay in Tobago, the island where Daniel Defoe supposedly based his *Robinson Crusoe*, is an occasion for Walcott to develop a meditation on the middle-aged artist based on Defoe's eighteenth-century character and a famous episode of the Trojan wars narrated in the *Iliad* (Book XVIII). The little girls coming back from church in their Sunday bests are 'Friday's progeny' (p. 72). In the first stanza, an allusion is made to the famous shield fashioned by Hephaestus (whom the Romans called Vulcan). In a Caribbean context, the gods' blacksmith who walked with a pronounced limp but produced exceptional work can possibly appear as a reinterpretation of the Anansi figure. The shield episode is a metaphor triggered by a very personal memory of the author's, that of the church bell ringing. Here the narrator views the sea in the stifling hot air of the island as a shield similar to that which Vulcan forged for Achilles after he had lost his own, which he had lent to his unfortunate friend Patrocles, who was killed by the Trojan hero Hector.

Initially in the poem, the evocation of Achilles' shield appears only as a visual metaphor referring to the sight of the ocean in full sunshine. The metallic image is then pursued with the mention of the hot corrugated iron roofs. In the following stanzas, the Homeric metaphor gives way to an exploitation of the



Crusoe motif envisaged from the point of view of the lonely artist stranded in an environment where natural beauty prevails but nobody takes the slightest notice of his activity. In the third section of the poem, it becomes clearer that this is a meditation on creation. The poem starts with the childhood memory of the chapel bell which is one of the deepest and one which is hardest to express in words. It can be evoked obliquely by resorting to the mythological story of Vulcan fashioning Achilles' shield. In Homer's version, besides being a formidable weapon, the shield is an incomparable work of art in which the whole world is represented. Walcott uses the shield as a metaphor for artistic creation. The bronze cast becomes an image of the restrictions and limitations which prevent the artist from expressing himself fully. Using a favourite metaphor, the narrator in the poem wishes for the mind to 'catch fire till it cleaves/Its mould of clay at last' (p. 71).

In 'Landfall, Grenada', a poem dedicated to 'Robert Head, mariner', Walcott expresses his desire to see life plainly, in a matter-of-fact way, like the sailor for whom the sea 'held no mythology' but was simply a working place. Walcott aspires to this 'no-nonsense' attitude to life, which is just the opposite of the self-dramatisation evident in so many of the poems. This desire for plainness is to be associated with the different passages in his poetry where the speaking voice expresses its admiration for the simple craftsman, the carpenter working at his bench. This is one pole of the conflicting ways in which the poet conceives of his art, the other one being the urge for romantic myth-making.

In 'Homecoming: Anse La Raye', all the classical mythology learnt in school proves of no avail to counterbalance the feeling that the returning West Indian artist is generally ignored by the local population and his dreams of being their voice remain unacknowledged: 'Whatever else we learned/...of Helen and the shades/of borrowed ancestors,/there are no rites/for those who have returned...' (p. 127).

In 'Sea Grapes', 'That sail which leans on light/tired of islands//... could be Odysseus,/home-bound on the Aegean;//... like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa's name//... since Troy sighed its last flame,/and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough...//The classics can console. But not enough' (p. 297). The poet is increasingly aware of the limits of classical episodes to give meaning to his understanding of the world. The piece entitled 'Archipelagoes' in 'Map of the New World' starts as a meditation on the passing of a sail on the horizon. This vision echoes the end of the Trojan war with all the material elements (Helen's hair, Troy...) fading into dissolving shapes. Everything seems to have gone. '[I]nto a mist will go the belief in harbours' (p. 413). There are no more certainties; one cannot hope for sure goals or landmarks to find one's way. Yet, in the final stanza, when everything has faded, there remains an old man 'with clouded eyes', a replica of Homer, who 'plucks the first line of the

*Odyssey*'. When all hopes have gone of finding an anchoring in firm ground, the poet finds reassurance in attempting to reproduce the first creative act of one of his favourite models. Homer, the arch-creator of myth remains one of the surest paradigms in a world where the poet has lost confidence in values that have proved limited or false.

In 'The Sea Is History', the poet proposes an alternative history to replace the official colonial version. In the process, he traces the main elements of another myth – in the sense of a representation offered to a group of people to give meaning to their experience, particularly in relation to their conception of origin. Walcott, the mythmaker, argues that history in the Caribbean cannot be found in archives or written documents but is locked up in the sea. On first reading, the poem may be considered as a postcolonial alternative to the imperial conception of history. Yet, instead of starting with the Amerindians, as one might expect, the narration begins with the light of a caravel, then moves on to the slave trade and the suffering of the transported Africans. Next come the privateers, then the tidal wave that destroyed Port Royal in Jamaica. When, in the eleventh stanza, the reader encounters a voice which is clearly that of a local guide, speaking in a sort of Creole and offering to take the tourist diving to see for himself where these historical remains are to be found,<sup>12</sup> one begins to suspect a measure of distance on the part of the narrator.

Looking back on the whole development, the words used to refer to the different stages in history are all borrowed from the Bible: the slaves suffer Exodus, then the bones of the drowned being soldered by coral are the Ark of the Covenant, while the enslaved Africans are taken into Babylonian bondage. The rhetoric here is that found in some syncretic religions in the Caribbean. The narration continues with an evocation of Gomorrah as the bones of dead slaves are ground into marl and windmill. The speaking voice enumerating these various stages in mythic fashion and using biblical rhetoric is somewhat contradicted by another voice which objects that 'that was just Lamentations,/ it was not history' (366). As the argument moves on from Old Testament to New Testament imagery, the critical voice adds: 'but that was not history,/that was only faith' (367). With the narration reaching the independence period, various contemporary politicians file past as though taking part in a carnival of animals. The poem ends with a loud chuckle audible in the sea pools. One suspects this may be the voice of the narrator having fun with all these alternative versions of history. They were offered as a kind of regional myth, but are clearly loaded, ideologically speaking. The conclusion sounds like a sort of cosmic laughter of despair at the vanity of the enterprise.

'From This Far' expresses the persona's frustration at the fact that 'in the soils of our islands no gods are buried./They were shipped to us, Seferis/dead

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<sup>12</sup> See another similar situation in 'North and South', p. 405.

on arrival' (p. 414). Yet the old heroes have left a treasure of metaphors which the poet delights in using. In this poem, the 'net of branches' on the beach is enriched by the evocation of Agamemnon. When, in Section II, 'a net is flung over the shallows' (p. 415), the poem acquires a new layer of meaning with the possible echo of the ancient episode when Agamemnon is said to have been imprisoned in a net before being murdered by his wife as a punishment for his having sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia.

An evolution can be traced in Walcott's use of specific myths in *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. In the early poems, Greek mythological characters are used fairly regularly as comparisons or metaphors. Far from abandoning this hoard of fictional representations, Walcott returns to it time and again, not in a spirit of slavish imitation but as one of the most inspiring fields for poetic creation. He associates in his poems classical as well as more modern and definitely multicultural elements, imagery and metaphors. Particularly in the more recent collections, myths are used as part of a metapoetic enterprise in which they give wider significance to topical experiences. Walcott seeks to walk in the footsteps of illustrious models, among whom Homer looms large. The use of Greek myths requires active participation on the part of the reader in the deciphering of the allusions. In this sense, the texts are destined primarily for a cultivated audience. In a multi-faceted poetic work, whose architecture can be compared to that of a prism, myths are one of the multiple entrance points into the creator's grappling with the mysteries of the world (and of the word) in a complex multicultural environment where the role of the artist remains precarious and yet essential.

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