

## Review · Ben Howard

*Midsummer*. Derek Walcott. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1984. \$12.50 hardcover. 70 pp.

In three decades and seven collections of verse, Derek Walcott has charted his ambivalence and exile. Born and bred on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, Walcott grew up an English-speaking Methodist among Catholics who spoke a Creole patois. That experience taught him to live with estrangement and to mediate between two cultures. It also proved prophetic for a poet who has become, in his own description, “a single, circling, homeless satellite,” accepting the role of “colonial upstart at the end of an Empire.” As the leading poet and playwright of the West Indies, Walcott has witnessed the twilight of the British Empire from an Antillean perspective, savoring Edwardian grace while detesting the scars of British oppression. As the author of painterly formalist poems and loosely woven plays, he has blended English and Caribbean traditions, creating an idiom that owes much to Keats, Jonson, and Marlowe and something to reggae and Calypso. And in recent years, having taken up residence in Boston, Walcott has discovered yet another mode of ambivalence, another form of exile. Dividing his year between Trinidad and North America, he has sought to acquire the American vernacular and to put the “small cold pebbles” of the American language on his tongue. Out of his wanderings has come, in Walcott’s phrase, a “maggie style,” assembled from widely disparate sources. Yet that style has produced some of the most distinctive poems in contemporary verse.

One thing Walcott has not been ambivalent about is his devotion to the poet’s art. His sense of vocation is passionate and severe. Yet in his recent work Walcott has begun to question his own lyricism and to cast a critical eye on the short heraldic poem. And in *Midsummer*, his seventh collection, he has created a book-length sequence which both extends the inquiries and challenges the premises of his earlier work. A series of fifty-four poems chronicling a year in the poet’s life, *Midsummer* pursues Walcott’s investigation of his black identity, his divided loyalties, his personal and literary genealogies. But in its gloomy midlife assessments, its deep self-

absorption, and its outbursts of self-hatred, *Midsummer* represents a change of spirit and tone. And its linear, serial form, which has something in common with a daily journal and even more with Lowell's *Notebooks*, signifies a turning-point for a poet who seems no longer content to wait for the privileged moment and the epiphanic vision. If not quite anti-lyrical, the calendric form challenges the premise of timelessness, the convention of occasion, on which most lyric poetry has been based.

Walcott's intentions may be discerned not only from his poems but from some of his recent statements. In an interview with James Atlas (*The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 1982), Walcott remarks that he no longer revises his poems, that he is after "the casual, relaxed throw of the thing, like something draped over a chair." And in an essay on Robert Lowell, having observed that the poems of *Near the Ocean* and *For the Union Dead* display the "casual symmetry of a jacket draped on a chair," Walcott goes on to defend the *Notebooks* against their detractors, grounding his defense in the English tradition:

Once we are used to heraldic, anthologized poems, we demand of poetry something more than merely loving it. We rummage in the unread, difficult, even failed poems of those whose great labors have grown dust. The real Browning, the real Donne, the real Ben Jonson are not in their lyrics but in their verse letters, book-long monologues, elegies, and speeches in dead plays. *Notebook . . .* will remain a mine for hard-working poets. Jaded sometimes by the music of poetry, we look for something else, something hard, complex, embedded: the ore itself. It was this search that turned Keats inward away from sweetness and bombast and that Lowell pursued further and further with each new book (*New York Review of Books*, March 1, 1984).

To turn away from sweetness is to turn from the formal music of the ode and sonnet to a more discursive idiom and a more expansive form. It is to abandon lyric intensity for introspective analysis, to renounce exquisite miniatures for more ambitious structures, where melody yields to the densities of speech, and the line approaches prose.

Walcott has not swung entirely in this direction. Once again his ambivalence is evident, both in the general concept of his sequence and in the

structure of particular poems. The concept is a kind of compromise: a series of untitled, page-length poems, each with its own fidelity to the moment, all adding up to a coherent, if loosely gathered, whole. As the title suggests, the poems evoke the tropical summer, but they also present autumnal scenes in England, winter in Boston, a snowstorm in Chicago. In several poems Walcott broods on revolution in Latin America, envisioning the “crawling lava of military concrete.” Elsewhere he muses on Impressionism, recalls his Methodist childhood, and pays homage to lost friends and fellow poets. Within the elastic confines of Walcott’s sequence, the poems can admit almost any theme or subject, teasing it out or letting it drop. Yet the poems themselves are as tightly-knit and thematically singular as Keats’ sonnets.

The structure of the poems is, in fact, somewhat deceptive—an inveigling mixture of nonchalance and rigor. In a derisive review, William H. Pritchard has dismissed *Midsummer* with the remark that “each poem goes on for around twenty or so lines of irregular length, and in such a form, unrhymed, you can say just about anything that occurs to you” (*Hudson Review*, Summer, 1984). But a closer look reveals an inconspicuous pattern of rhyme, masked by elaborate syntax and strong enjambment:

You’ve forgotten the heat. It could burn from a zinc fence.  
 Not even the palms of the sea front quietly stir.  
 The Empire sneers at all thoughts in the future tense.  
 Only the shadows of this inland ocean mutter  
 lines from another sea, which this one resembles—  
 myths of analogous islands of olive and myrtle,  
 the dream of the drowsing gulf. Although her temples,  
 white blocks against green, are hotels, and her stoas  
 shopping malls, in time they will make good ruins;  
 so what if the hand of the Empire is as slow as  
 a turtle when it comes to treaties?

(“Tropic Zone,” vi)

These lines are not irregular—they are loose pentameters—nor are they unrhymed. But here the speaking voice subsumes the metrical pattern (“so what if the hand of the Empire . . .”; “when it comes to treaties . . .”), and the rhymes retreat behind the complex syntax and the enjambed con-

versational voice. Upon inspection some of the rhymes turn out to be approximate (*resembles, temples*) or even rather dubious (*stoas, slow as*). In any event, they make no more than a muffled sound, if that, and speech prevails over song.

Walcott's ambivalence toward verbal music can also be seen in the structure of his lines. James Atlas reports Walcott telling his students at Boston University that there is a "terror of making music in American poetry." One might take issue with Walcott on that point, citing the musicality of such poets as Nemerov, Pollitt, Glück, and Bell. But in a general way, Walcott is probably right; and insofar as he has sought to acquire American speech, or to write like the American poets he admires, he has moved closer to the flat American norm. At points he can still sound uncommonly mellifluous, as when he contemplates a Caribbean beach:

Go, light, make weightless the burden of our thought,  
let our misfortune have no need for magic,  
be untranslatable in verse or prose.  
Let us darken the stones that have never frowned or known  
the need for art or medicine, for Prospero's  
snake-knotted staff, or sea-bewildering stick;  
erase these ciphers of birds' prints on sand.

(XLVIII)

But passages like these stand in sharp contrast to others, in which a heightened colloquialism carries the day:

Today I respect structure, the antithesis of conceit.  
The overworked muck of my paintings, my bad plots! But  
always,  
when the air is empty, I hear actors talking,  
the resonance of what is both ordinary and wise.

(XIII)

In these lines Walcott seems not so much afraid of verbal music as averse to it, preferring the rhythms and diction of analytic prose.

But how far can Walcott proceed in this direction? How far is he willing to go? A partial answer may be found in his revisions, which point at

once toward greater precision and toward an effect of casual speech. Despite the poet's claim that he no longer revises, *Midsummer* contains substantially altered versions of three poems that first appeared in the *Times* with Atlas' article. One of these poems (which appears in a third, variant version as "Port of Spain" in *The Fortunate Traveller*) illustrates Walcott's general drift. The opening line of the poem—

Midsummer stretches before me with its great yawn.  
(*Times* version)

becomes

Midsummer stretches before me with its cat's yawn.  
("Port of Spain")

and finally

Midsummer stretches beside me with its cat's yawn.  
(*Midsummer*, VI)

Here the revisions tune and sharpen the line, and the improvement is obvious. A few lines later, however, the revision has a more complex and ambiguous effect:

And one waits for lightning as the armed sentry  
hopes in boredom for the crack of a rifle.  
(*Times* version)

becomes

And one waits for midsummer lightning as the armed sentry  
in boredom waits for the crack of a rifle.  
(VI)

Here the revision disrupts the regularity and balance of the original. The repeated verb (*waits*), the unwieldy adjective (*midsummer*), and the rhythmic agitation represent a choice for colloquialism over melody, speech

over song. One is reminded of William Stafford's statement on behalf of American poets: "Look: no one ever promised for sure/that we would sing." More to the point, perhaps, is Walcott's own admission: "The lines I love have all their knots left in" (XXV).

Of course, many of Walcott's lines *do* sing, or sound their trumpets, as when he proclaims that "the marching hosannas darken the wheat of Russia,/the coiled ram hides in the rocks of Afghanistan" (XXII). And as the texture of his lines, knotted or unknotted, polished or coarse, betrays an ambivalent attitude toward the music of verse, so his deployment of image and metaphor, ranging from the most literal description to the most involuted figuration, reveals an uneasy stance toward metaphoric thought. On the one hand, the poems of *Midsummer* strive to be entries in a daybook, transcriptions of the quotidian, rendered with exact notation. On the other, they yearn to abandon sequential description and linear thought, to intuit the numinous in metaphoric visions, and to create "lines as mindless as the ocean's of linear time, / since time is the first province of Caesar's jurisdiction" (XLIII, ii). Sometimes the two impulses quarrel within a single poem—or even within a single line.

Walcott's visual acuity distinguishes everything he writes. For the reader, his eye's catch is a continual delight, whether the subject is a Caribbean beach, a street on Beacon Hill, or a railroad crossing in Ohio. An accomplished painter himself, Walcott celebrates the "lemon-rind light in Vermeer" and the "rust-edged" images of van Ruysdael; and he recalls a time when he "brushed a drop of water from a Flemish still life/in a book of prints, believing it was real" (XVII). In his poems he often achieves similar effects:

Pale khaki fields of dehydrated grass  
peer behind pointless fences—all the corn farms, straw.  
A sky so huge, its haze is violet.  
Over gelid canals, the wands of the pollard willows  
fade when the highway branches into some small town;  
spring, this Sunday, has come in a single stride  
to Ohio, skipping the thaw. It's still February,  
but the dazed hills couldn't tell you where winter went;  
the light is rolling the white, facing side  
of houses in Athens, Lancaster, and Wheeling,  
polishing the stubble till it shines like brass.

(XLVI)

This is literal description of a high order, and it can be found throughout Walcott's sequence, whether his subject is observed or imagined. As he reflects wistfully upon "the other 'eighties, a hundred midsummers gone," he imagines "the rippling accordion, / bustled skirts, boating parties, zinc-white strokes on water, / girls whose flushed cheeks wouldn't outlast their roses" (XVIII). In an earlier version he had written "zinc-white sails on water." The gain in precision is obvious, as is the evidence of meticulous attention.

Yet for Walcott visual precision is not enough. Having grown up in an Edenic, tropical, metaphor-spawning culture, where renaming was a way of life, and a martin or tern overhead became "*un ciseau la mer*" (scissor of the sea), Walcott cannot be content with literal description. Metaphor, like song, is in his blood; and more than most poets, he compulsively refashions what he sees, usually through intricate tropes and sometimes at the expense of clarity and directness:

In the thatched beach bar, a clock tests its stiff elbow  
every minute and, outside, an even older iguana  
climbs hand over claw, as unloved as Quasimodo,  
into his belfry of shade, swaying there.

(XXVIII)

Reading such passages, one wishes for a direct assertion, a literal statement. One also wonders whether the conventions of the daybook are compatible with a metaphoric cast of mind. Where the daybook calls attention to the present moment, the metaphor directs attention to another time and place. Before we can feel the presence of the clock hand or the iguana, we have been transported elsewhere.

Walcott is well aware of the problem. Speaking discontentedly, as he often does in these poems, about the labors of composition, he depicts himself spending "a whole life lifting nouns like rocks" (XL) and complains that "everything I read/or write goes on too long" (XL). Despite his commitment to the book-length poem and his urge to create something "hard, complex, embedded," Walcott distrusts "the maundering ego," desiring "all synthesis in one heraldic stroke," "like Li Po or a Chinese laundry mark!" (IX). And beyond this wish for intuitive lightning, for the flash of insight, he hankers after the mystical vision and its atten-

dant language, the transfiguring moment within the matrix of the quotidian:

Between the V made by your parted socks,  
stare at the charred cave of the television.  
Before its firelit image flickers on  
your forehead like the first Neanderthal  
to spend a whole life lifting nouns like rocks,  
turn to the window. On a light-angled wall,  
through the clear, soundless pane, one sees a speech  
that calls to us, but is beyond our powers,  
composed of O's from a reflected bridge,  
the language of white, ponderous clouds convening  
over aerials, spires, rooftops, water towers.

(XL)

Significantly, this vision of timeless speech rises not from the contemplation of sea and sand but from the mundane environs of an American motel. Here, as in *The Fortunate Traveller*, Walcott takes the stance of the “Trailways fantasist,” who “still believes in angels” and seeks transfiguring visions among prosaic things.

And to what extent has he realized such visions or achieved his aesthetic objectives? Veering as it does between the poles of song and speech, image and metaphor, bleak fact and visionary fiction, is *Midsummer* a triumphant synthesis—or a failed amalgam?

Critical opinion has been sharply divided on that point. For Terry Eagleton the book offers a “blending of metaphorical depth with apparently casual, spontaneous perceptions,” a weave of “concrete detail” and “global reflection” (*TLS*, November 9, 1984). For Peter Stitt, *Midsummer* is a “magnificent volume, thematically expansive and beautifully written” (*The Georgia Review*, Summer, 1984). But for Steven Ratiner, who praises Walcott’s “finely tuned ear and musical sense,” *Midsummer* is ultimately a disappointment, a “scrapbook of color snapshots,” wherein the “figure of the poet is obstructing the view” (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 6, 1984). And for William H. Pritchard, who complains of “Whitmania” and “elephantiasis” in Walcott’s lines, the poems all sound too much like Lowell, and the sequence itself is a “mistaken enterprise” (*Hudson Review*, Summer, 1984).



Between such divergent views there is, perhaps, no happy medium, but Paul Breslin probably comes closest to the truth in saying that *Midsummer* is “not ‘better’ than previous Walcott, but . . . different and comparably excellent” (*Poetry*, December, 1984). These new poems do not offer the elegance and lyric delicacy of *Sea Grapes*, nor the rich brocade of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, nor the colloquial vigor of *The Fortunate Traveller*. What they do offer is a risky, uneven exploration, in which passages of great resonance and aural beauty must compete with awkwardness and uncertainty. At times the exploration seems more dogged than revelatory, as when Walcott sketches a humdrum portrait of the poet shaving:

My double, tired of morning, closes the door  
of the motel bathroom; then, wiping the steamed mirror,  
refuses to acknowledge me staring back at him.  
With the softest grunt, he stretches my throat for the function  
of scraping it clean, his dispassionate care  
like a barber’s lathering a corpse—extreme unction.

(XI)

Neither the metaphor of the double nor the hyperbole of the corpse can salvage this banal notation. The poet appears to be recording for the sake of recording, grafting ornamental figures upon a drab description.

But elsewhere Walcott is far more persuasive. When he is mourning the loss of his innocence or his Methodist faith, or honoring the memory of his mother, or, most poignantly, lamenting the loss of his mentor and friend, his language rises to meet its subject:

Cal’s bulk haunts my classes. The shaggy, square head tilted,  
the mist of heated affection blurring his glasses,  
slumped, but the hands repeatedly bracketing vases  
of air, the petal-soft voice that has never wilted—  
its flowers of illness carpet the lands of Cambridge,  
and the germ of madness is here.

(XII)

At such moments—and there are many in *Midsummer*—one is reminded that Walcott is a poet of uncommon powers, whose chief strength is an

ability to join strange bedfellows and harmonize warring forms. In the presence of a memory that stirs him, a legend and friend who engages his deepest affections, Walcott achieves that synthesis which elsewhere escapes him. The elements of speech and song, fact and metaphor, join to form a compelling whole.