

## **Oration for Derek Walcott, given by Dr Maria Cristina Fumagalli**

When he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, Derek Walcott declared that he is only one-eighth the writer he might have been had he contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad. This is of course a great tribute to the multicultural nature of the Caribbean but I never thought this meant good news until I had to write my five-minutes oration for him....

Having to deal only with one-eighth of the potential Walcott is no mean task. He has achieved so much during his extraordinary career that the time at my disposal should be multiplied eighty times eight to even begin to do him justice. And in any case, where and how does one begin to celebrate the work of one of the best, if not the best, of our contemporary poets?

Well, the 'where' is perhaps not too difficult to identify. Walcott's love for his native Caribbean, for its landscape, its people and its culture has always been the driving force behind his work. He is simply delighted when he can talk about it and when he can express the joy and privilege that he had in watching Caribbean literature bud and flourish. One should not forget that Walcott has *always* believed in this possibility. From the very beginning of his career he was able to see fresh opportunities in the Caribbean where others could only see deprivation, corruption, mimicry. This strength of vision depended and depends on his extraordinary capacity to conceive and represent the world in ways that go beyond received explanations and conceived formulae. To engage with Derek Walcott's works means breaking out of the limits of one's way of thinking, even of one's way of living. One becomes aware of the need to cleanse one's vocabulary and most importantly, to cleanse one's mind. Fixed templates are in fact revealed for what they are: unhelpful analytical devices and, most importantly, utterly useless revolutionary tools. Because Derek Walcott is a revolutionary, a revolutionary of a very special kind.

'The future of West Indian militancy, he wrote almost 40 years ago, lies in art'. His militancy as a Caribbean artist has been informed by a stubborn rejection of the sterile rhetoric of revenge and resentment and by a constant urge to pay attention to the predicament of common people. Take any of his plays or his collections: Walcott's main characters are fishermen, waitresses, housewives, bus drivers, homeless and

refugees, slaves and ex-slaves. His portrayal of their lives invariably goes beyond victimhood and a hypocritical romanticisation of the poor in order to arrive at a positive, non-complacent articulation of agency. He never ever absolves the colonizers for what they did but refuses to simplify things by demonizing them. The way forward for Walcott is and has always been the creation of moments and spaces in which the oppressed and the oppressor can be brought together, communicate and attempt some form of mutual recognition. While drawing our attention to the fact that empires and socio-political power in general are transitory and that their position of prominence is never irreversible, his poetry compellingly recasts past and present in order to create a future that it will be poetry to inhabit.

Walcott's preoccupation with conveying Caribbean local intensity never made him blind to the rest of the world. His passion for literature has always transcended geographical, national and temporal boundaries. Painted and literary landscapes have not been less inspiring to him than real ones. Indeed, his verse responds with equal emotion and commitment to John Clare's countryside ravaged by the enclosures, to the 'visible syntax' of Cezanne's series on Mount St Victoire, to Eugenio Montale's minimalist seascapes, to the cold comfort of Edward Hopper's North American light, to Seamus Heaney's divided Ireland and to the suffering heart of Spain displayed by Goya. The fact that Walcott has never visited some of these places is of no consequence at all: the propulsion of metre, the modulation of sound, the disciplined exuberance of rhyme that make Walcott's landscapes real on the page and allow readers and poet to experience the local intensity of his literary geographies.

Walcott in fact does not believe in and does not practice free verse. For him poetry is first and foremost the art of writing metrically and he has repeatedly sustained that 'modern poetry should reinvade the theatre, not hang out in the lobby shabbily like a second cousin.' Yet, his love for rhythm and sustained metre notwithstanding, he has also insisted, and I quote, that 'this craftsmanship would mean nothing unless life were made so real that it stank'. This is why Walcott's cannot be a poetry of asides. This is why it never yields to meaninglessness and stubbornly refuses to accept that human beings don't or cannot communicate through language. Walcott's is a poetry that believes in itself, in what it has to say and, crucially, it believes in its readers. More than this: as Walcott said of Brodsky's, it is a poetry that with its extraordinary

immediacy and freshness transforms readers into poets. If you trust it, it delivers you, quite literally, into 'another life.'

I cannot remember how many times I have read Walcott's *Another Life*, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, *Omeros*, *Tiepolo's Hound*, *Epitaph for the Young*, *Ti-Jean and his brothers*, *What the Twilight Says* – I could go on .... Most importantly, I cannot remember who I was before I read these works. Over the years, Walcott's poetry, his plays and his essays have never betrayed me: in his words I found comfort, strength, immense pleasure and, perhaps most importantly, a real intellectual challenge and endless food for thought.

I started reading Walcott as a student and now I read his works to my students. It has been said that teachers are just postmen who deliver other people's messages. I have delivered Walcott's 'letter to the world' for a number of years now and it is always a great joy to see how it makes my students vibrate, how it galvanizes them and how they get inspired. Many of these students are here now because their life too has been changed, and changed utterly, by the encounter with his work. This is why I would like to conclude this oration simply by giving thanks to you, Derek Walcott.

'We read, we travel we become' says the narrator of *The Prodigal*: if it is true that we end up becoming what we read, then you have made us all much much wiser.