Writing the Autobiography of My Father

Curdella Forbes


A man, hungry, unable to read or write, curses God. He dies violently, still cursing, howling at history. His offspring, unacknowledged, perpetuate their father’s bequest of material and mental poverty. Out of this erasure of history emerges one son who, not being able to read or write or (therefore) reflect on his own being, “has a line drawn through him.” He nevertheless produces a daughter, who writes his story. By shaping him in terms of the written word, she grants him recognition, names him with a name, invites us to “Hear Mr. Potter! Touch Mr. Potter! See Mr. Potter”—reference to whom now begins every sentence of his own (unknown to him) redacted memoir.

Rendered in stunningly compelling prose, Jamaica Kincaid’s Mr. Potter recalls music and song—fugue, religious litany, (parodic) biblical enunciation of genealogies, Nordic lament, children’s nursery rhyme, the Weltanschauung of T. S. Eliot’s Wasteland. Mr. Potter is also elegy and revenge code; history (auto/biography) and myth; a project of identification and the deliberate negation of identity; a discourse about writing and the erasure of sentences.

The hologrammatic “portrait” that this matrix of discursive possibilities overlays is Kincaid’s father, who “has been the central figure in [her] life without either of [them] knowing it.” The book is the latest in the cycle of autobiographical and putatively fictional writings about Kincaid’s relations with her family, writings through which Kincaid has sought to work through the problematics of a personal, literary, and historical
(West Indian) identity. These texts represent a series of journeys that paradoxically end where they begin: with the conviction that a radical form of self-empowerment is necessary and capable of achievement only through the rejection of antecedents—that is to say, through the credo of a new self in imperative disjunction from the histories from which it was produced. With My Brother, the motif of the mother as the point of severance began to be mediated; with Mr. Potter, which might well have been subtitled The Autobiography of My Father, the paternal connection is examined.

The most important detail in the book is that Kincaid says she did not know her father. He visited her once, at her home in the state of Vermont, in the United States, and she did not know what to call him. Before that, she glimpsed him once when, as a small child in Antigua, she waved to him from across a street. “I said . . . through gestures only, that he was mine and I was his, that the world, in all its parts, was complicated, with plates beneath its surface shifting and colliding, vast subterranean cauldrons of steam and gases mixing and then exploding violently through the earth’s crust, that the seemingly invisible spaces between two people who shared a common intimate history were impossible to destroy” (p. 125).

The horror of the encounter was not that Mr. Potter paid hostile or dismissive attention. It was that “he only rolled his shoulders . . . and looked at the spot on the street which I occupied. . . . Not only did he ignore me, he made sure that until the day he died, I did not exist at all” (p. 125). This erasure, repeated in Mr. Potter’s similar treatment of the many daughters he had fathered upon the bodies of as many women, becomes not only the source of a lifelong hurt but also the ground on which Kincaid is able to create Mr. Potter, the fictional construct who is nevertheless “real.” The paradox of that reality and its fictionality mirrors the complex of conundrums about life and art, identity and anonymity, things and their opposites, with which Mr. Potter is concerned.

Mr. Potter is a death song: both elegy and a chant against the dead. The elegy is sustained through the book’s consistent rhythm of litany and in its ritualized apostrophes of lament. The imagined deracination of her father’s life, which made him unable to love his children, is movingly portrayed (“and the sound of Mr. Potter’s voice, so full of all that had gone wrong in the world for almost five hundred years . . . could break the heart of an ordinary stone” [p. 23]). So too is the personal history of motherlessness, unloved fostering, and unschooling that Kincaid constructs for Mr. Potter, placing it in the context of a larger history within which Caribbean life is circumscribed. That Mr. Potter is only one instance in a sociopolitical world governed by destructive patriarchies is signified in the tandem sketches of patriarchal/colonial/imperial figures whose lives impinge on Mr. Potter’s; these include the “Lebanese/Syrian or whatever,” after whose daughter
Kincaid says she was named;¹ and the English admiral George Brydges Rodney, after whom Mr. Potter was almost named.

Kincaid mourns cycles of colonial curse, concretized in her father’s case at two points of origin: his mother’s suicide and his rejecting father’s death, the latter marked by inscriptions of blight and disease. The futility of her father’s life is for Kincaid expressed in the “fact” that Mr. Potter failed to attain the basic condition for humanity, namely, the capacity for self-reflection. Self-reflection, which is simultaneously a recognition of one’s phenomenological relation to the cosmos and a radical separation from it, is the arrival of subjectivity. For Kincaid, self-reflexivity reaches its apogee in the writer’s craft, the ability to “read and write.” In his failure to do these, Mr. Potter is rendered contemptible (pp. 20–21 and following).

It is in this sense of a contemptible inability to separate from the cosmic that Kincaid’s narrative becomes a chant against the dead. Mr. Potter’s illiteracy focuses the revenge code inscribed in ritual repetitions throughout the narrative: “Mr. Potter could not read and he could not write, but I can read and I can write” (emphasis mine), “[a]nd now I say, ‘Mr. Potter,’ but as I say his name, I am reading it also, and so to say his name and to imagine his life at the same time makes him whole and complete, not singular and fragmented, and this is because he is dead and beyond reading and writing and beyond contesting my authority to render him in my own image” (p. 193). The ability to write Mr. Potter in her own image is the hurt child’s revenge for having been abandoned. Kincaid skillfully weaves between the contradictions of rescuing Mr. Potter from the imposed anonymity of history and denying him the agency that belongs even to a fully fleshed-out fictional character.

Kincaid’s insistence on Mr. Potter’s mindlessness is not merely a retributive denial of his humanity, or a metaphor for his having played no part in her life that allowed her to know him as a human being. It is also an analogue for the paradox of the writer’s creative authority, an authority that threatens to be emptied out by the artist’s inescapable knowledge that it too is a constructed fiction. Its every phrasing contains its contradiction: “I am not making an authorial decision, or a narrative decision, I only say this because it is true: Mr. Potter’s life is his own, and no one else should take precedence. And so this . . . paragraph will begin [with Mr. Potter]” (pp. 9–10). The deliberately disingenuous disclaimer points simultaneously to Kincaid’s triumph over her father (for she is in fact making an authorial and narrative decision) and to the subversive refusal of

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¹. Kincaid’s given name is Elaine Richardson Potter.
the real-life subject to be reduced to the constructed “originality” of the writer’s words. In the same way, Mr. Potter’s vocal absence (he speaks fewer than ten phrases, each mediated by translation, displacement, and parentheses) highlights his construction by focusing her narrative strategy. Kincaid’s many references to her narrative authority point to the fictionality of all writing and particularly of biography and autobiography, both heavily directed by the paradoxes of memory, forgetting, and experience received through secondhand narration.

Similarly, the fact that Mr. Potter is constructed as a one-dimensional man/nikin on which Kincaid’s personal projects are elaborated, highlights writing as an act of self-creation. This inscribes the close relation Kincaid perceives between life and death (Eliot’s “in my end is my beginning,” paraphrased in Kincaid’s text). Kincaid’s freedom to write her father and thereby herself comes from the fact that he is now dead and unable to protest. The elegy then traverses the liminal space between death and the possibility of life that it affirms, and between that possibility and its impossibility—for the affirmation of her authority to “make and unmake” (p. 158) her father is also a lament at the fact that the act of writing has explored the cycle of inherited bitterness and left it unexorcised.

Exorcism is a major project of the text’s invocation of Mr. Potter’s ghost. The project’s failure emerges through the over-insistent declarations of authorial triumph and through Kincaid’s direct confession: “[I have] metamorphosed into something new . . . something that might inspire desire and envy, [but also] entrapment and then death, through those unbreakable fibres I could feel Mr. Potter . . . for he was my father and so he was in me . . . an entire half of me was made wholly of him” (pp. 154–55 passim). The elegy is then finally Kincaid’s, a mourning for her own personal sense of death, rooted in the paradox of fictionality, the limitations of its ability to ameliorate or transmogrify. Toward the end of the book, she asserts her radical break with familial history: her father drew a line through her, but she has drawn a line through nobody, she has conferred on her own children love, thereby breaking the generational cycle of curses.

But the paradoxical shadow of exorcism is incorporation. Kincaid makes no attempt to erase the contradictions of her own identity implicated in her definitive comment on Mr. Potter’s life: “But to what end? To no end at all” (p. 67). Neither does she avoid the ironies of the material insignia of her own triumph: she faces him in her large room, furnished with maps and other trophies of the colonizing world, the cartographies of a destiny inscribed beyond words, on black skin. The one irony that Kincaid elides is the contradiction of a judgment so exigent that it is ultimately religious, yet refuses to admit the possibility that she too might merit judgment, or its corollary, forgiveness. The gestures of contempt and the singular authority by which she speaks for her children finally
erase the unwritten possibilities of Mr. Potter; elegy is cancelled in unremitting indictment. (That Kincaid has received Mr. Potter mainly through her mother’s secondhand narration is as much his possibility of redemption as it is his punishment, but Kincaid is uninterested in the former.) These issues of judgment and forgiveness, which may be at the heart of Kincaid’s melancholia, and the melancholia itself, product of a sense of abandonment, haunt us with equal force at the end of *Mr. Potter.*
Localizing the Aesthetic Search: Walcott’s Caribbean Poetics in Abandoning Dead Metaphors

Harold McDermott


Patricia Ismond’s study of what she terms the “Caribbean phase” of the poetry of 1992 Nobel laureate Derek Walcott is, fittingly, another accolade for the poet’s artistic genius and contribution to the articulation of a Caribbean national culture and identity. Unlike some recent studies of Walcott’s work, which tend toward theoretical approaches that are essentially totalizing and which, in subtle and overt ways, seek to minimize and de-emphasize cultural distinctions, Ismond’s project is deliberately ideological and nationalistic. In the act of claiming a regional icon who has been variously appropriated (especially among “metropolitan critics” as an “international,” “federated,” and even “American” poet), she explores the extent to which Walcott’s current world stature is grounded in and informed by issues of Caribbean identity and self-definition. Drawing her title from Walcott’s votive insistence in “The Castaway” and elsewhere in his work to “abandon dead metaphors,” Ismond argues that Walcott’s theoretical pro-
nouncements during the early phase of his literary career signal the superstructure of a Caribbean aesthetic that is echoed and amplified in his later work outside the region. Hence, her overarching claim that what the mature Walcott eventually achieves is inspired and conditioned by decidedly Caribcentric impulses.

Ismond posits that Walcott’s “Caribbean phase,” from his first published volume, *25 Poems* (1948), to *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979),¹ comprises a discrete category with an integrity of its own, a foundational category that certainly yields insight into the formative aspects of the poet’s craft. Ismond’s theorizing about Walcott’s poetic development during this phase is heavily dependent on the poetics of place. The Caribbean is selectively read as the locus of alternative values in the dialectical encounter between the Old World and the New. She cogently asserts that this formative phase of the poet’s work is the “place where he pursues the revolutionary effort native to his purpose as a writer of colonial origin to arrive at maturity of definition self and identity” (p. 2). She repeatedly uses the term “revolutionary effort” to underscore her thesis that meanings and definitions arising from this phase are foundational to the total Walcott and to the nature of the syncretism he later espouses. Like Edward Baugh, Ismond argues that Walcott perceives, in the metaphoric art of language, a greater reality than that found in the phenomenal world, namely the imagination itself. This use of language is the repository of a culture’s dominant mode of intelligence and the vehicle through which a tradition may emerge.

Her insistence on the centrality of place as a deterministic influence on Walcott’s aesthetic formation underpins her concomitant repudiation of current postmodern and postcolonial readings of the poet’s work. Her position is congruent with the cultural theorizing of many other Caribbean intellectuals. She insists that Walcott’s “revolutionary effort” is a counterdiscourse of an alternative and liberating order of values and meanings generated by the crucible of Caribbean place (landscape) and time (history). In Walcott’s “metaphoric enterprise,” the argument goes, landscape functions as an artifact that generates fresh metaphors, countering and refuting the values of older ones and answering to indigenous needs and realities (p. 55). It is driven by a strong urge to find a regenerative route out of negation and the crisis of an oppressive nihilism. At points, Ismond’s argument seems an apology for Walcott’s much-discussed penchant for overt mimicry of the style and themes of other poets in his early career. For instance,

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¹ Ismond uses the term “Caribbean phase” to refer to the approximately ten volumes of published poetry that Walcott produced between 1948 and 1979, just before he left the region to live and teach in America.
she casts his appropriation of the style of the Metaphysical poets as part of the process of metaphoric substitution. She makes a credible claim that “all his borrowings cited [at this stage] are metaphoric formulations, ideas and perceptions, coded in expressive imagery” (p. 38).

By “dead metaphors” Ismond means the older concepts, values, and order of the Western world and word that have come to define a normative humanity (p. 46). In the context of Walcott’s phraseology, however, “abandonment” does not necessarily connote the total repudiation of Old World modes of perception, but creative adaptation to suit the exigencies of place and time. Walcott himself, in his critical essay “What the Twilight Says” (1970), terms this “not new names for old things, or old names for old things but the faith of using old names anew.” The motivation to “abandon dead metaphors,” Ismond posits, is prompted by the imperative of naming as a means of giving formal shape and order to perceived nothingness. At this phase of his poetic development, it signals a radical new departure from his apprenticeship and marks the true beginning of his quest for identity. She further argues that Walcott awakens from the contradiction and incongruity of this apprenticeship to a keen confrontation with the question of identity. Considering Walcott’s juvenilia, however, especially in Epitaph for the Young (1949), one wonders if it is not the site of a vigorous debate, as the colonial subject, with a filial anxiety for inclusion, attempts to locate self in relation to empire and tradition.

Half of the book (chapters three to six) discusses Walcott’s engagement with local politics and social issues in the politically charged and turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Ismond’s focus here is not misplaced, for no fewer than four of Walcott’s major theoretical essays defining a Caribcentric aesthetic were written during this period. By claiming that the aim of Walcott’s social engagement in his work during the 1970s is intended to effect “a minimum of protest and, equally urgently, that of invoking consciousness and consciousness as the means of self-liberation and direction,” she infers that his emerging aesthetic eschews political radicalism despite its often strident language against the political establishment in Sea Grapes (1976) and The Star Apple Kingdom (1979).

In considering Walcott’s attitude toward the atavistic aspects of ethnicity as aesthetic influence, Ismond correctly admits his “lapses and contradictions often associated with the heat of polemics” (p.117). She contends that his criticism of black nationalism seems insensitive to the positive impetus of the rhetoric of recuperation, especially given the prolonged denial and abnegation of black cultural forms (p.116). She sees an imbalance in his highlighting the excesses and pitfalls of making absolutes of ancestry and history in the cause of race when his biggest quarrel with the muse of history is leveled at histori-
cally privileged imperial history. Walcott’s seeming denial of black cultural nationalism, especially in the 1970s, suggests an ambivalence in his thinking on just how far Africa should be accepted as content and stylistic mode for a regional aesthetic. A natural corollary to this evolving debate is the place of prominence that African-inspired “folk” traditions ought to hold in a regional aesthetic. Arguably, this debate finds tentative, if not contradictory, resolution in Walcott’s poetic development extending all the way to his Nobel lecture in 1993.

Ismond interweaves commentary on the poetry with that of Walcott’s plays to complement her analysis and buttress her argument for the poet’s consistent thematic engagement, variation, and reworking of certain tropes over time. This easily is one of the strengths of Ismond’s book; she adeptly portrays the trenchant way in which such intertextuality illustrates how form and content, theme and style are inexorably allied in both Walcott’s poetry and drama.

*Abandoning Dead Metaphors* is a signal achievement and a rewarding synthesis of over thirty years of distinguished scholarship on Caribbean literature in general, and specifically on the art of Derek Walcott as both poet and playwright. It is a well-researched book that the serious Walcott scholar will find insightful and an invaluable exposition of the poet’s early development. The accessibility and clarity of her style, aided by the chronological structure, ensure that the “Walcott-uninitiated” will find this book a boon.
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