

WALCOTT'S WORLD

Derek Walcott, who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature this year, was born in 1930, in St. Lucia, a Caribbean island that passed from British to French hands no less than 13 times. The island's rich heritage encompassing Carib, African, French and British traditions, its schizophrenia as a British colony which was mainly Catholic, its history of slavery and colonialism, find expression in Walcott's poetry, as he explores his identity as a 'divided child', an exile, a mulatto of style. The figure of Crusoe, who was castaway on a Caribbean island figures prominently in Walcott's work, as he identifies with Crusoe the castaway, survivor, artist and coloniser, while also acknowledging Friday, the colonised ancestor.

CRUSOE'S JOURNAL

I looked now upon the world as a thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no expectation from, and, indeed, no desire about. In a word, I had nothing to do with it, nor was ever like to have; so I thought it looked as we may perhaps look upon it hereafter, viz., as a place I had lived in but was come out of it; and well might I say, as Father Abraham to Dives, 'Between me and thee is a great gulf fixed'.

-ROBINSON CRUSOE

Once we have driven past Mundo Nuevo trace
safely to this beach house
perched between ocean and green, churning forest
the intellect appraises
objects surely, even the bare necessities
of style are turned to use,
like those plain iron tools he salvages
from shipwreck, hewing a prose
as odorous as raw wood to the adze;
out of such timbers
came our first book, our profane Genesis
whose Adam speaks that prose
which, blessing some sea-rock, startles itself
with poetry's surprise,
in a green world, one without metaphors;
like Christofer he bears
in speech mnemonic as a missionary's
the Word to savages,
it's shape an earthen, water-bearing vessel's
whose sprinkling alters us
into good Fridays who recite His praise
parroting our master's

style and voice, we make his language ours,
converted cannibals
we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ.

All shapes, all objects multiplied from his,
our ocean's Proteus;
in childhood, his derelict's old age
was like a god's. (Now pass
in memory, in serene parenthesis,
the cliff-deep leeward coast
of my own island filing past the noise
of stuttering canvas,
some noon-struck village, Choiseul, Canaries,
crouched crocodile canoes,
a savage settlement from Henty's novels,
Marryat or R.L.S.,
with one boy signalling at the sea's edge,
though what he cried is lost.)
So time, that makes us objects, multiplies
our natural loneliness.

