



DEREK WALCOTT

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening, good evening. My name is Paul Holden­gräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. As all of you know, my goal is quite simply to make the lions roar, though quite recently we made the lions rap when we had Jay-Z here at the Library. It's been an amazing season for us interviewing Supreme Court justice Stephen Breyer to start us out in September and an evening tomorrow with the *National Lampoon*, a tribute to the *National Lampoon*. I hope you will all be able to come. We have also had as I said Jay-Z. And you probably were wondering why we were playing Harry Belafonte, in part as a tribute to Harry Belafonte

because he was in this audience last week to listen to Jay-Z. We had Jay-Z, Zadie Smith, who was another lecturer in the Robert Silvers series. Keith Richards, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, W. S. Merwin, and we will start our season on the 8th of January—mark your calendars—with a tribute to Gypsy Rose Lee. You may not know this, but the Library, the New York Public Library, has the archives of Gypsy Rose Lee. So we will be exhibiting in part some of her more delicate items. And we will have a discussion on the burlesque and other matters which remain to be determined.

We will also have the pleasure of having Mark Salzman, and Philip Gourevitch will be part of a series I'm organizing with the French government. He will be discussing what constitutes an enemy today. We will have a session on the notion of happiness as seen from America and from France. On the America camp, we will have Maira Kalman and Lemony Snicket, David Brooks will be joining us as well, A. B. Yehoshua and Howard Jacobson who just won as you know the Booker Prize. Colm Tóibín will be here, we will be presenting that event with the Cullman Center. We are now in the good habit I think of cohosting one event every year with the Cullman Center. This year we had David Grossman with Nicole Krauss. Also appearing Karen Armstrong, Julian Schnabel, Wole Soyinka, Tina Fey, an evening with Chris Blackwell to celebrate the fifty years of Island Records, and many, many, many more other events. So please stay in touch. You can find most of our events online, and I hope you will become members. If you become a member for forty dollars a year, which is a pretty cheap date if you ask me, you can get tickets for the price of a movie.

Paul LeClerc, the president of this venerable institution, the New York Public Library, very much regrets not being able to be present tonight. In his absence he has asked me to read on behalf of him these few words. He is very pleased to welcome, as am I, for the ninth annual Robert B. Silvers lecture which will be given this evening by Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, he's very pleased to be welcoming Bob Silvers. The title of Derek Walcott's talk is "Hemingway and the Caribbean." It is a pleasure to welcome Derek Walcott, for me, for a second time LIVE from the New York Public Library.

Robert Silvers will introduce Derek Walcott properly, but before he does, Paul LeClerc would like to say a few words about Bob himself, in whose honor this lecture series is given. The series has been most generously underwritten by Max Palevsky, who was a friend of mine when I was living in Los Angeles, a philanthropist who shares our admiration of Robert Silvers. His wonderful gift has made it possible for us to invite a constellation of literary stars, including Joan Didion, John Coetzee, Ian Buruma, Michael Kimmelman, Daniel Mendelsohn, who is right here in the front row and I'm very pleased that he could make it, Nick Lemann, Zadie Smith, who I interviewed a few weeks ago, and Oliver Sacks, whose individual and collective brilliance reflects the diversity of Bob's own interests as well as his unflagging championship of the arts, letters, and sciences.

Robert Silvers is the cofounder and editor of the *New York Review of Books*, a publication that has been the standard-bearer for literary and aesthetic criticism for more than forty years. But the years have not mellowed the *Review*. It is still the best incubator for fierce

opinions and peerless insights and remains a source of revelation to thinking people the world over. Robert Silvers's commitment to the intersection of literature and scholarship is also evident in his work beyond the *Review*, and he's a book editor, anthologizer, translator, and editorial adviser to *La Rivista dei Libri*, the first foreign-language edition of the *Review*. He's a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and I'm very proud to say that he has served ably and wisely as a trustee of the New York Public Library since 1997. I also am happy, though Paul didn't tell me to say this, to count him among the great supporters of the LIVE programs we do here at the library. He has been honored for his good works both in the country and abroad. In addition to being a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences he has been named Chevalier d'Ordre National du Mérite in France. In a personal note, Jody Evans, Max Palevsky's widow, who would loved to be here as well told me to tell you the following. I asked her, "Are there any words I can say tonight?" and she said Max loved and respected Bob Silvers. And I quote, "He would be in literal ecstasy when he finished reading the *Review*. There was," Jody says, "a beautiful love and respect between these two men."

When the world knew that Derek Walcott was coming tonight many were those who sent me poems of his they love. "Love after Love" was sent to me many, many times and so I would like to take this brief moment to read it to you.

"Love after Love"

The time will come

when, with elation

you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

I'm delighted that this event brings both Robert Silvers and Derek Walcott to the Library this evening. Please join the President of the New York Public Library and all of those present here to warmly welcome Robert Silvers to this stage.

(applause)

ROBERT SILVERS: Good evening, and thank you, Paul, for those words. Before these lectures happened I felt that editors like myself should on the whole work with writers, to stay out of sight, somewhere back in the middle distance, you might say, but when Max, Max Palevsky, who was a great philanthropist and an original scientist made the truly startling suggestion that he do something in my name I was not only touched by that generosity but I also felt an editor's impulse to do something to honor writers I'd greatly admired and to do so in a way that would involve the two institutions that have meant most to me: the *New York Review* and the New York Public Library, which seems to me one of the most admirable institutions we have. It's a truly democratic source of the mind of the city, and so I must say thanks to the Library and to Paul for making all this possible, and thanks to Max.

Now, after our lectures by the very people Paul mentioned, Joan, and John Coetzee and Danny Mendelsohn and Zadie and Oliver Sacks, I was particularly happy when Derek Walcott said that he would give this year's talk. He's the first poet to do so, and a poet whose work we've been happy to publish in the *Review*, who's written for us brilliantly on poets as different as Philip Larkin and his friend Joseph Brodsky. He was born in 1930 in the town of Castries on the windward isle of Saint Lucia, where he started out as a painter as well as a poet. And what a pleasure it's been for me to see the landscapes, the brilliant landscapes he's continued to paint, on walking into a room in Boston or Santo Domingo or San Francisco. He was a founder of the Theatre Workshop in Trinidad that produced many of his plays while he was writing the poems that have now been collected in some twenty-two books of verse and that were eventually to bring him the Nobel Prize,

a prize in recognition, as the committee put it, of his “grace, luminosity of language sustained by his historical vision,” a vision, the Swedish academician said in his talk, “that carries the ancient murmurs into the moving fresh Caribbean now.” And this brings to mind that only a month ago there was a hurricane in that fresh Caribbean Sea, a hurricane that caused great destruction in Saint Lucia, that nearly prevented Derek from coming tonight. And so I am especially grateful that he’s here and that his talk will bear on his life in the islands and on his fellow Caribbean writer Ernest Hemingway.

I’ve been struck again and again by the critics of his many collections who seemed oddly challenged by his work, who seemed to strain and fumble in trying to grasp its power and its beauty. And yet those critics also take a kind of thrill in that challenge, in recognizing the virtuosity and depth and range of the poetry they grapple with. Years ago the great classicist Bernard Knox wrote for us about what he called Derek’s magnificent narrative poem *Omeros* in which the Homeric narrator lives partly in a fishing village on Saint Lucia. And Bernard Knox admired, he said, “the multiple threads that weave the lives and deaths of his characters into a pattern that is as dazzling and swift in its motion as the waves and clouds of the Caribbean, a pattern that connects visions of Lisbon and Dublin with the original African home of the islands’ inhabitants, a pattern that merges the chains of the Antilles with the archipelago of the islands of Greece and the poems of Homer and does so with a mastery of rhyme and a music so subtle, so exquisitely right,” Knox wrote, “that it never once in eight thousand lines strikes a false note,” and never, also as Knox put it, “loses sight of the theme of exploitation, once colonial, now native,

now also a matter of the entrepreneur. Nor losing sight, “nor losing sight,” as Knox said, “of the betrayals and desertion entailed in lives lived between black and white.”

In an essay that we published, Joseph Brodsky took hold, took hold of that peculiar challenge I have mentioned, and he wrote that “Derek is neither a traditionalist nor a modernist. He can,” he said, “be naturalistic, expressionistic, surrealistic, imagistic, hermetic, confessional. He simply has absorbed all the stylistic idioms of the poetry of the North in the way whales do the plankton or the painter the palette. He is on his own and in a big way. He is a man,” Joseph said, “by whom the English language lives.”

Derek Walcott.

(applause)

DEREK WALCOTT: I’m going to do a kind of trial run of a couple of sentences and I’d like to hear your complaints. Is this okay? All right. Well, this will be the only time. Do you have any complaint about the projection at all? Am I clear?

There is a force whose natural rage can smash the terra-cotta cliffs like crockery and mash up the archipelago into islands. He is the god of wind, and his Caribbean name is Hurucan. This is a poem to his power.

Once branching light startles the hair of the coconuts,
and on the villas’ asphalt roofs, rain

resonates like pebbles in a pan,
and only the skirts of surf
waltz round the abandoned bandstand,
and we hear the telephone cables
hallooing like fingers tapped over an Indian's mouth,
once the zinc roofs begin wrenching their nails
like freight uncrated with a crowbar,
we remember you as the possible
deity of the whistling marsh-canes,
we doubt that you were ever slain
by the steel Castilian lances
of a thousand horizons,
deity of the yellow-skinned ones
who thatched your temple with plantains.

When the power-station's blackout
grows frightening as amnesia,
and the luxury resorts
revert to the spear-tips of candles,
and the swimming-pools in their marsh-light
multiply with hysterical lilies
like the beaks of fledglings uttering your name,
when lightning fizzles out

in the wireless, we can see and hear
the streaming black locks of clouds,
flash the gamboge of lightning,
and the epicanthic, almond-shaped eye
of the whirling cyclops,
runner through the cloud-smoke,
our ocean's marathon strider,
the only survivor
of their massacred deities.

Whose temples change
like the clouds over Yucatán,
in the copper twilight over Ecuador,
runner who can grip the mares' tails
of galloping cirrus,
vaulting the dead conquistadors of the helmeted palms.

You'd never reply
to the name of the northern messenger
whose zig-zag trident
pitchforks the oaks into straw,
nor to the thunderous tambours
of Shango, you rage
till we get your name right,

till the surf and the bent palms dance
to your tune, even if, at your entrance
clouds plod the horizon like caparisoned camels,
and the wind begins to unwhirl
like a burnoose, you abhor
all other parallels
but your own,
Hurucan.

You scream like a man whose wife is dead,
like a god who has lost his race,
you yank the electric wires with wet hands.

Then we think of a different name
than the cute ones christened by radar,
in the sludge that sways
next day by the greased pier-heads
where a rowboat still rocks in fear,
and Florida now flares to your flashbulb
and the map of Texas rattles,
and we lie awake in the dark
by the dripping stelae of candles,
our heads gigantified on the walls

and think of you, still running
with tendons feathered with lightning
water-worrier, whom the chained trees
strain to follow,
havoc, reminder, ancestor,
and, when morning enters, pale as an insurance-broker,
god.

Here is Hemingway in a short story after the storm, entering the weather so that the white page itself frosts with gulls, with clouds and foam. The prose of a naturalist but with colloquial vigor: “Brother, that was some storm. I was the first boat out and you never saw water like that. It was just as white as a lye barrel and coming from Eastern Harbor to Sou’west Key you couldn’t recognize the shore. There was a big channel blown right out through the middle of the beach. Trees and all blown out and a channel cut through and all the water white as chalk and everything on it; branches and whole trees and dead birds, and all floating. Inside the keys were all the pelicans in the world and all kinds of birds flying. They must have gone inside there when they knew it was coming.”

After the storm, now immediately after Hurricane Tomas I asked, is the marina all right? Did the yachts and sailboats lift and shiver against their concrete docks? Are the car parks flooded? Are the tables in the restaurant where we ate nearly every dusk intact or in shambles after the hurricane? We were always lucky with hurricanes in Saint Lucia. They

usually slither north towards Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands or Jamaica while the Southern Caribbean was spared except for some heavy rain and wind.

Now, I write in agonizing ignorance of how much damage has happened to my island. I knew that the town of Soufriere has been badly hit, as they say. The banana crop has been widely, considerably leveled. There has been no drinking water for days. There have been deaths. Years ago I showed Joseph Brodsky a new poem about a hurricane. He said it was good. There was only one thing wrong with it. "What?" I said. He said there was no death in it. Now there are fifteen made by the fury of Tomas.

What has gone, what is left? Even in their devastation the hurricanes have beauty.

Warned against being too near the glass while I was staying at a beach hotel in Saint Lucia, I remember defying the warning and looking out through the wide glass pane, and seeing the palms blowing as low as grass in the horizontal rain, beautiful but fatal. Also beautiful the tempestuous breakers, drumming and crashing along the beach, the different shoreline that would be there tomorrow.

Once in Jamaica after a hurricane, I saw a freighter parked on the road to Palisados. The irritations and expectations come after the storm. Black roads, water shortage, landslides. The island contracts and shrinks after its disaster. Multiply this across the whole arc of the Caribbean. Each island has a memorial year and a nickname for the hurricane that hit it. Waves moving in instant garlands drenched the causeway across from my house on

Becune Point in Saint Lucia. All their labor ends in heaps of exhortation, in inaudible applause. The waves move in long sentences; the bay is lined like a page.

The sea's sibilance, its ceaselessness, have entered the lined pages of certain masterpieces set in the Caribbean. Hart Crane's poems, a lot of Hemingway's fiction. *To Have and Have Not*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Islands in the Stream*. This from *To Have and Have Not*: "They came on across in the night and it blew a big breeze from the northwest.

When the sun was up he sighted a tanker coming down the gulf and she stood up so high and white with the sun on her in that cold air that it looked like tall buildings rising out of the sea and he said to the nigger, 'Where the hell are we?' The nigger raised himself up to look. 'Ain't nothing like that this side of Miami.' 'You know damn well we ain't been carried up to no Miami.'"

How to read this now, to explain that this was how this book about black people in those days fifty years ago will not do? The speaker is not penitential. To pretend that their attitude has changed is potential farce. Both Hemingway and Mark Twain, creator of Nigger Jim, enjoyed the rhythm of the word as much as any redneck but without contempt.

"You know it damn well we ain't been carried up to no Miami,' he told the nigger." "He told the nigger." I let the phrase enter me. The scar might still be there. It was habit and not venom, it was too casual, even affectionate. It elevated the nigger into something approaching friendship but not quite. If I were a Jew writer, Robert Cohn, in *The Sun*

Also Rises, I would resented the way I was treated, but as a black island fisherman it was hardly worth the effort. It was not crass or contemptible. You felt an innate dignity in the nigger that was superior to Harry Morgan and to Hemingway, Harry Morgan's creator. There was respect, even envy in their exchange. At that instant, both himself and his creation are fools, belittled by a superiority they take for granted. Harry Morgan the fool, and Ernest Hemingway, his creator, the bigger fool. Why should I give a fuck if Morgan was Hemingway, that he got shot to death in his boat in the mangroves, or that two levels to bravery, one for Morgan and a lesser one for the nigger. Shouldn't I have stopped reading and flung the book aside? I lived among niggers; it could have been not me on that boat, but I was more Harry Morgan than Wesley—that was the nigger's name. His name might have been Obama.

Forgivable? Understandable? No, just lacking the immense oceanic compassion of a truly great writer, not an ocean now, not truly perennial, but a lake, a provincial pond, a rivulet, a gutter. The brown cliffs slide past the churning bows of the catamaran, the villages holding on to their names as we plunge along the sand and coast of Saint Lucia until we slowly round the coming promontory into another bay. And the elation of the weather, the slap of salt wind in the face, the thrumming engine under the foot and the sudden startling saw of a frigatebird rustle like a page of Hemingway, the nouns wet and fragrant and salty.

I've always shared his prose with the spirit of the Caribbean. Like compressed monosyllables, almost in pidgin, conversations punctuated paragraph by sunlight by glare

in Havana and Miami and Bimini. There is a salty reeking mangrove where a mortally wounded Harry Morgan lies rocked by his boat, his punishing cradle. You know that smell? It has tree crabs in it, snails, and frogs. A vegetal mulch that stinks of mortality.

Across the harbor of Castries, the capital of Saint Lucia, there was a gamboge-colored tower, part of a fort, surrounded by trees and with an orange or rust-red roof that looked like L'Estaque, Cezanne's favorite landscape, and also like a hill in Italy, the trees the cube of the fort, the indigo blue of the sea at the tower's base, when they were looked at syllabically, when they were conjugated as prose, had the stasis of a paragraph in Hemingway. That composition, that syntactical scansion, was built stroke by stroke, syllable next to syllable, as my motto so that my palette to this day consists of slate-blue, orange, and the modulations of green.

Below that gamboge wall like a battlement, my first true love lived, solid in the magical light of a tropical dusk, a light that was from another country as my love herself seemed to come from another country, perhaps Italy. The tower, the yellow wall, a processional wave of the dock and its boathouse at a distance that was fabulous, a medieval fragment. The light had a simplicity that stayed in the descriptions of Hemingway. Not surprising because of the medieval design of his stories. His young heroic knight, often maimed or wounded, and his doomed maidens. The plots of the novels are as emblematic as legends. The knight, a doomed princess, a dragonish war—the rhythm of the narrative was often that of the fairy tale and the nursery rhyme.

In his early work in *In Our Time*, Hemingway writes, “The king was working in the garden. He seemed very glad to see me. We walked through the garden. This is the queen, he said. She was clipping a rosebush. Oh, how do you do? She said. We sat down at a table under a big tree and the king ordered whiskey and soda. We have good whiskey, anyway, he said. The revolutionary committee, he told me, would not allow him to go outside the palace grounds. Plastiras is a very good man I believe, he said, but frightfully difficult. I think he did right though shooting those chaps. If Kerensky had shot a few men things might have been altogether different. Of course the great thing in this sort of an affair is not to be shot oneself! He was very jolly. We talked for a long time. Like all Greeks he wanted to go to America.”

Here at sunrise on the island fifty years ago, I imagined thoughts of my first love, Anna, awaking. When the oil-green water flows but doesn't catch, only its burnish, something wakes me early, draws me out breezily to the pebbly shelf of shallows, where the water chuckles and the ribbed boats sleep like children, buoyed on their creases. I have nothing to do. The burnished kettle is already polished to see my own blush burn, and the last thing the breeze needs is my exhilaration.

I shall make coffee.

The light, like a fiercer dawn,
will singe the downy edges of my hair,
and the heat will plate my forehead till it shines.
Its sweat will share the excitement of my cunning.

Mother, I am in love.

Harbour, I am waking.

I know the pain in your budding, nipples, limes,

I know why your limbs shake, windless, pliant trees.

I shall grow gray as this light.

The first flush will pass.

But there will always be morning,

and I shall have this fever waken me

whoever I lie to, lying close to, sleeping

like a ribbed boat in the last shallows of light.

“Let’s go for a little walk,” she said, one afternoon. “I’m in a walking mood.” Near the lagoon, dark waters’ lens had made the trees one wood, arranged to frame this pair whose pace unknowingly measured the loss. Each face was set towards its character. Where they now stood, others before had stood. Same lens, island, the repeated wood, then each one the self-delighting self-transfiguring stone stare of the demigod. Stunned by their images they strolled on, content that the black film of water kept the print of their locked images when they passed on.

Which of them in time would be betrayed was never questioned by that poetry which breathed within the evening naturally, but by the noble treachery of art that looks for fear when it is least afraid, that cordially takes the pulse-beat of the heart in happiness but praises the need to die to the bright candor of the evening sky that preferred love to

immortality. So every step increased that subtlety which hoped that their two bodies could be made one body of immortal metaphor. The hand she held already had betrayed them both by its longing for describing her.

Here is Anna, recently, after a visit. Sixty years after. In my wheelchair in the Virgin lounge in Beaufort, I saw her sitting in her own wheelchair, her beauty hunched like a crumpled flower, the one who I thought was the fire of my young life would do her duty to be golden and beautiful and young forever even as I aged. She was treble-chinned, old, her devastating smile was netted in wrinkles, but I felt the fever briefly returning as we sat there, crippled, bearing time and the life of general pleasantries. Small waves still break against a small stone pier where a boatman left me in the orange diesel dusk a half-century ago. Maybe happier being erect, she like a deer in her shyness, I stalking her an impossible consummation. Those who knew us knew we would never be together, at least not walking.

With the silent knives from the intercom went through me. Over the years as I traveled, I found myself confirming cities and places that I had read in Hemingway, Miami, Venice, Key West, Bimini, Madrid, Pamplona. Doing things that were in the books such as eating lamb ribs barbequed on pine branches in an awful place with a noise and a river like a dam, not in the spirit of literary pilgrimage, but every city authenticated his prose. Here is Barcelona, which I came to late, its roofs and streets rhyming with its name.

There was a roar outside like a rocket arching over the roofs this morning. Then under the black iron balconies, a brass band marching, detonated for some saint or labor union, defending Catalonia with civic thunder. You smiled down at them with their banners and sashes, but all you did in Barcelona was cough like one of those veterans with mournful moustaches left over from the civil war. That is not enough for such a great city, but you take time in portions, one cough at a time, your personal thunder that turns compassionate heads. What I had waited for was for the name to be a banner over every street, crucifixions and velvets, candles and purple crepe, for the crowd in the plaza to leap to its feet and the flourish and trembling stasis of the matador's cape. I could never join in the parade, I can't walk fast. Such is time's ordinance. Lungs rattle, eyes that run, now Barcelona is part of my past.

We know Hemingway's reputation was that of a writer in exile. The setting of most of his fiction had been in Europe, in Spain and Italy, now he showed that he could write about our country to which his prose belonged. *To Have and Have Not* was political and leftist, his piratical hero was a loner and apart from the rich in the marinas of Key West and Miami. Harry Morgan, his parallel in another aspect of the book was Richard Gordon, also a writer, the Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber, who is now morally impotent despite his big-game hunting. Richard Gordon's wife abuses him in the same terms as his wife does Macomber. The rich in their yachts and the maritime in their marinas rock in their wealth.

Richard Gordon says, "You're married to me." "Not really, not in the church, you wouldn't marry me in the church and it broke my poor mother's heart, as you well know. I was so sentimental about you. I would break anyone's heart for you. My, I was a damn fool. I broke my own heart too. It's broken and gone. Everything I believed in and everything I cared about I left for you because you were so wonderful and you loved me so much that love was all that mattered. Love was the greatest thing, wasn't it? Love was what we had that no one else had or could ever have and you were a genius and I was your whole life. I was your partner and your little black flower. Slop. Love is just another dirty lie. Love is ergoapiol pills to make me come around because you were afraid to have a baby. Love is quinine and quinine and quinine until I'm deaf with it. Love is that dirty aborting horror that you took me to. Love is my insides all messed up. It's half catheters and half whirling douches. I know about love. Love always hangs behind the bathroom door. It smells like Lysol. To hell with love. Love is you making me happy and then going off to sleep with your mouth open while I lie awake all night afraid to say my prayers even because I know I have no right to any more. Love is all the dirty little tricks you taught me that you probably got out of some book. All right. I'm through with you and I'm through with love. Your kind of pick-nose love. You writer."

"You writer," who has given us such joy and God, what a good one, to record this quarrel so exactly. Though it's more than a quarrel. Despite her protests, its tone, having reached its peak, still has a possibility of reconciliation, with its fury, its intimacy, it's like opening the page of a book of an opened door and coming up on a scene so horrific in its marital savagery that we want to shut the door quickly and hurry away. There are times

when Hemingway is merciless with himself. When he ridicules his own pomposity and has selfishness, where having built for himself a comfortable haven in Finca Vigia in Havana he confesses to an aversion, a responsibility to the poor, the diseased neighbors of the paradise of ghettos around him. His shield is liquor.

Alcohol, Red Stripe beer, fueled the discussion that we three writers one night in Jamaica were having in my small house near the university in the 1950s. John Hearne the novelist, Slade Hopkinson, the actor and poet, and me. We were planning a visit to Cuba to present ourselves to Hemingway, a surprise tribute from three Caribbean writers. We would go to the Finca Vigia outside Havana and tell Hemingway how much we were indebted to him. We were certain that he would invite us in to have some drinks. We were absolutely certain of it. This without money for airplane tickets, taxi, or hotels, because he was someone whose work made us grateful and happy. Because he knew what it all looked like, the mountains after rain, the rain that traveled the horizon in slow-moving veils, the sight of leaping marlin, dolphins racing, all those things that brought us happiness with his prose, the height of frigates floating above the perennial Caribbean sea. Here now in *Death in the Afternoon*, the days of early sharpening pencils ritualistically to produce the trance that produces poetry afterwards.

“If you could make the yellow flames of candles in the sun; that shines on steel of bayonets freshly oiled and yellow patent leather belts of those who guard the Host; or hunt in Paris through scrub oak in the mountains for the ones who fell into the trap at Deva (it was a bad long way to come from the Café Rotonde to be garroted in a drafty

room with consolation of the church at order of the state, acquitted once and held until the captain general of Burgos reversed the finding of the court) and in the same town where Loyola got his wound that made him think, the bravest of those who were betrayed that year dove from the balcony onto the paving of the court, head first, because he had sworn they would not kill him (his mother tried to make him promise not to take his life because she worried most about his soul but he dove well and cleanly with his hands tied while they walked with him praying); if I could make him; make a bishop; make Candido Tiebas and Toron; make clouds come fast in shadows moving over wheat and the small, careful stepping horses; the smell of olive oil; the feel of leather; rope soled shoes; the loops of twisted garlic; earthen pots; saddle bags carried over the shoulder; wine skins; the pitchforks made of natural wood (the tines were branches); the early morning smells; the cold mountain nights and long hot days of summer, with always trees and shade under the trees, then you would have a little of Navarra. But it's not in this book."

And finally in tribute to Hemingway and home, the simplicity of Saint Lucia, no opera, no gilded columns, no wine-dark seas, no Penelopes scouring the stalls for delicate glasses. No practiced ecstasy from the tireless tenor. No sweets and wine with no interlude. No altos, no basses and violins sobbing as one. No opera house, no museum, no actual theater, no civic center. And what else? Only the huge doors of the clouds with the setting disc through which we leave and enter. Only the deafening parks where they jump in crowds and the felling speakers. Only the government buildings down by the wharf and another cruise ship big as the capitol, all blue glass and cement. No masterpieces in huge frames to worship and such banalities as life being spent in brightness and yet there

are days when every street corner rounds itself into a sunlit surprise, a painting of rays, canoes drawn up by the market, the harbor's blue, the barracks. So much to do still. All of it praise. Thank you.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very much, Derek Walcott. Derek Walcott has agreed to take a few very good questions from the audience. Questions can be asked, as you know, in about fifty-two seconds, so if you would be willing to come up to the mike, and ask our poet laureate, Nobel Prize winner, a question, he would be delighted to answer. This audience is not particularly well known for its shyness.

Q: Thank you so much for speaking. Did you meet with Hemingway? When you went to see Hemingway did you meet with him?

DEREK WALCOTT: Did we go?

Q: Yeah.

DEREK WALCOTT: No, we didn't have the money.

Q: I was wondering. Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Excellent. That's the spirit.

Q: What technical aspects of Hemingway's writing, if any, most appeal to you, and maybe most inspire you in a poetic way?

DEREK WALCOTT: There's supposed to be a mystery but there isn't. The mystery is as he himself described it is the mystery is hard work and concentrated work. What Hemingway writes is very simple prose, but the mystery is in the simplicity. The mystery is why is it that another sentence by someone else describing something very familiar does not have an aura or an echo? It's not journalism, it's not just description, it's not just good prose. There is something incantatory, almost sacred, in the kind of effects he gets out of his prose, ordinary words. I think that there is a vibration that enters a prose that is genuine that is something—you may be amused by this—but it's very close to prayer, it's very close to ritual, and it's very close to veneration of language, word by word, that creates that echo that is Hemingway's style.

Everybody can write a kind of simple prose. All journalism does that. But a journalistic sentence by a very good writer of journalism does not come up to the vibration that happens and the aura that happens in Hemingway's descriptive prose, and I think it came from how he ritualized himself into making that happen when he was a younger writer. So I think it's the feel of the prose that I admire.

Q: This may be a similar, a related question—you may have partially answered it. You referred to John Hearne and yourself in the 1950s and of course many people date the flourishing of West Indian or Caribbean literature to the postwar period, so I would be curious to hear a little bit more, if you would, about what Hemingway meant to a person like John Hearne and to yourself. And I think you mentioned a third person—was there a third person that you were going to go meet Hemingway in Cuba with?

DEREK WALCOTT: I think it was close to idolatry. This thing that happens in reading Hemingway, this enchantment that happens is something that we all shared. John was a great devotee of Hemingway, you can see that from his style, but more than style I think Hemingway provided a kind of code of conduct that went with the prose, that's why I think it's, you know, almost religious.

Q: A little bit off-topic but with the loss of Caribbean culture nowadays kind of being taken over by popular American consumerist culture, do you think there is a future for Caribbean art, especially through poetry?

DEREK WALCOTT: Do I think there's a future for what?

Q: For Caribbean art, for a distinctive Caribbean voice to exist.

DEREK WALCOTT: Caribbean art? Yes, I think anybody who lets themselves really be threatened by, you know, America kind of encourages it himself or herself. There's a

kind of attraction in defiance that is dangerous as well. I think the present condition of Caribbean literature is extremely strong. We have very good young writers in their forties or thirties from different islands, with different accents and different experiences.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Can you name some names?

DEREK WALCOTT: Lorna Goodison, Caryl Phillips. A lot of them are my friends so I can't mention all of them.

Q: Thank you. I'd like to know if you consider Trinidad and Tobago your second home. Is there a love affair with Trinidad and Tobago or some sort of fascination with it?

DEREK WALCOTT: What?

Q: Trinidad and Tobago. Do you consider it your second home?

DEREK WALCOTT: Where do I consider my present home?

Q: Second home.

DEREK WALCOTT: Second home. I don't think of a first or second home. I mean, I live in Saint Lucia, but my daughter lives, one daughter lives in Trinidad and that's as much home to me as my own home. There are differences in the islands, I'm not a

sociologist, but they're basically the same, and the experience is the same, and there's a very unifying sense of the Caribbean when you go off the islands.

Q: Has being poet laureate affected you as a poet? Has changed the way you sort of see your writing?

DEREK WALCOTT: Poet laureate. That's not who I am.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Has becoming a Nobel Prize affected your poetry?

DEREK WALCOTT: Nobel laureate. Well, in one way it's affected my life, that's one of the reasons I'm here. I think that I hadn't won the Nobel Prize, they wouldn't have invited me, I don't know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think you might.

DEREK WALCOTT: It hasn't affected my way of life in any particular difference. I think it's made me more responsible in a way as a writer to deliver your rest and to think of an audience that is quite immense, not that you write for them, but the consequence of winning the prize results in a very wide, a much wider readership. As I've often said, I look at the photograph that the Nobel committee issues of all its winners and I find my face there and I feel like hiding, so that's how it's affected me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mr. Walcott, you have written a lot about Haiti, what does Haiti mean to you and what do you think Haiti should mean to readers?

DEREK WALCOTT: I have never been to Haiti, which is regrettable. But I have been tormented, fascinated by the anguish of Haiti and the amount that it has to suffer. Nothing—no sooner than one affliction ends, another one arrives, you know. There's something in the quality of the strength of the Haitian people, though. I think that's there. And I think that the Haitian revolution is one of the most traumatic and consequential events, a long event, that happened in the Caribbean and has remained an example for leaders in the Caribbean, and the drama of it is phenomenal, the epic scale of it and the heroes of it or the villains of it, whether it's Dessalines or Christophe or Pétion or whoever. I have often tried to do a film about Haiti. That should come someday because it really deserves—it would make a terrific Western.

Q: Thank you.

Q: I would like to ask through what medium did you first encounter the work of Hemingway? Was it in book form or did you encounter his stories in *Esquire* or *Collier's* or periodicals or predominately in books?

DEREK WALCOTT: Book form. Books.

Q: And were they available widely in Saint Lucia?

DEREK WALCOTT: Yeah, they were standard commercial publications. I've said this before that sometimes if you're poor and you have—you tend to have a better library if you're poor than if you're wealthy and you buy trash.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It seems to me not a bad note on which to end. We have the pleasure of having 192 Books here, an independent bookstore, as you know I very much prize independent bookstores. I hope Derek Walcott will sign some of his books, and before doing so I would like to thank him very warmly from the bottom of my heart.

(applause)