

Review

JUSTINE McCONNELL, *DEREK WALCOTT AND THE CREATION OF A CLASSICAL CARIBBEAN* (Classical receptions in twentieth-century writing). London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. viii + 193, illus. ISBN 9781474291521 (hbk), £75.00; 9781350343146 (pbk); 9781474291538 (eBook); 9781474291545 (ePDF).

This compact monograph addresses the crucial role of the Greco-Roman literary tradition in shaping the aesthetic programme of the Caribbean poet and Nobel laureate, Derek Walcott. An Introduction that outlines the thematic scope of the work is followed by three short chapters whose titles reflect its ‘theoretical underpinnings’ under the rubrics (1) Time, (2) Syncretism and (3) Re-creation. Walcott’s seminal notion of a ‘simultaneous’ temporality that collapses past and present linear historical moments is explained fully in the first chapter; the understanding of Walcott’s poetics as embodying a ‘transcultural’ vision is the main focus of the second, while the third attempts to demonstrate the originality of Walcott’s creative project in terms of his idea of an Adamic ‘re-naming’ of components of the poetic landscape of the Caribbean. The discussion displays considerable overlap among the core arguments of each chapter, since the fundamental concept of ‘syncretism’ arguably constitutes the leitmotif of the study as a whole.

The vexed issue that dominates the book’s purview is the degree of originality to be attributed to Walcott’s bold appropriation and re-moulding of elements derived from the Greco-Roman literary canon. Central to the book’s approach to the controversy is the attention it pays to Walcott’s own published descriptions of his aesthetic programme in his highly acclaimed prose essays, such as ‘What the Twilight says: an Overture’, and ‘The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry’. McConnell evinces a thorough familiarity with the rapidly growing international critical literature pertaining to her theme. Especially commendable is her inclusion of contributions made to the debate by anglophone Caribbean critics such as Edward Baugh, Thomas Figueroa, Michael Dash and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. The judgements put forward by these and other leading Caribbean critics are taken into account alongside those articulated by English and American scholars such as Lorna Hardwick, Carol Dougherty and Joseph Farrell. The depth of McC.’s archival research related to the topic of Walcott’s self-presentation of his syncretising aesthetic is perhaps best illustrated by her acute comments on the working draft of the script that Walcott made for a projected film based on the interlaced narratives structuring *Omeros*. Although the film never saw the light of day, the poet’s notebook, which contains drawings as well as text, has been preserved in a Rare Books collection at the University of Toronto, and McC. draws on the pioneering work of Antoine-Dunne in bringing to light the script’s superposition of parallel internal narrative fragments in the projected montage.

Far from glossing over aspects of the negative local (Antillean) reception that sometimes accompanied the publication of Walcott’s major poetic collections and performances of his lyric drama in West Indian theatres, McC. confronts the main criticisms launched by some leading anglophone intellectuals in the region regarding the value and originality of Walcott’s re-fashioning of themes embedded in master works of Greek and Roman antiquity that encompass a wide variety of genres. Prime examples of her vigorous championship of Walcott’s radical poetics are the discussion of the unpublished play ‘The Isle is Full of Noises’, and of the local furor elicited by an earlier poem, ‘A Far Cry from Africa’, with its agonising register of the poet’s ambivalence concerning his hybrid cultural identity (English and Afro-Caribbean). The book’s final chapter, which seeks to explain Walcott’s adherence to a modernist vision of a ‘fragmentation’ and ‘re-assemblage’ of elements of the Western literary canon, sometimes assumes the tenor of an *apologia* (in the positive Greek sense) of Walcott’s grandiose creative project. In mounting her robust defense, McC. places major emphasis on the poet’s signature concept of the ‘simultaneous’ presence of poetic compositions across time and disparate cultural traditions — a concept most ingeniously manifested in the dramaturgy of *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, and in the much-quoted essay, ‘The Sea is History’, not to mention the entangled and fragmented plot lines that constitute the thematic texture of *Omeros*.

In mounting this incisive vindication of Walcott’s aesthetic stance as reflected throughout his lyric and theatrical corpus, McC. tends to engage in repetitious analysis rather than in building a more extensive argument. Despite this inevitable redundancy in the explication, however, the author of

Derek Walcott and the Creation of a Classical Caribbean has produced a well-researched and persuasive discussion of cultural ‘syncretism’ on the part of Walcott’s muse that takes into account the poet’s maturation and creative evolution. Nowhere is this maturation more evident than in McC.’s acute observation of a shift in Walcott’s attitude to the legacy of colonial oppression in Caribbean society. She points out in this regard that, whereas the poet had deplored the ‘poetics of affliction’ in his seminal quasi-autobiographical work *Another Life*, he later pens what may be described as an oblique recantation in a passage of *Omeros*, in which the wound of Philoctète acquires the status of emblem for the disaster inflicted by European empire builders on people of African descent in the New World. The nuanced perceptions contained in the *apologia* for Walcott’s aesthetic stance *vis-à-vis* the Greco-Roman literary canon make this book a substantial contribution to the flourishing subfield of ‘reception’ studies within the discipline of Classical Studies.

Duke University

gdav@duke.edu

doi:10.1017/S0075435824000145

GREGSON DAVIS

© The Author(s), 2024.

Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.