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Intimations of Transcendence in Derek Walcott's *The Season of Phantasmal Peace*

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'Between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace' (Walcott 34)

In a 1986 interview published in *The Paris Review*, Walcott professed that 'I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation.' *The Season of Phantasmal Peace* is a striking testament to Walcott's 'religious vocation'. Using a language that breaks free from formal conventions whilst simultaneously using them to cultivate an elevated idiom, Walcott celebrates and shares a moment of transcendence that acts as a multivalent symbol for the redemptive and transcendent powers of artistic beauty, love, and God.

In a manner reminiscent of poems such as Mallarmé's *Les Fenêtres*, in which a 'moribond' (moribund) (4) is lifted from his grim surroundings by a mystical vision of 'galères d'or [...] Sur un fleuve de pourpre' (golden galleys on a purple river) (17-18), *The Season of Phantasmal Peace* describes a transcendent vision where 'nations of birds' lift up 'the huge net of shadows of this earth' (Walcott 1-2) to leave all illuminated by 'phantasmal light' (10), an otherworldly radiance. Walcott's evocation of transcendence begins with the word 'Then' (1). As if starting abruptly *in media res*, this deictic gives the sense of a speaker jolted into awareness whilst implying that what came before is not worth mentioning and remembering—just as one would expect from the onset of a revelatory experience. The birds sing a 'soundless' (8) music that other mortals simply cannot access (12)—as if it were the music of the spheres—which further emphasises the transcendent nature of this experience, the fact that it is beyond the everyday, material world detectable by the senses. Accordingly, this experience is also beyond time. The songs are filled with 'Love, | Made seasonless' (27-28), 'above all change' (32), where just 'one moment' nonetheless 'lasted long' (33-35) and where 'evening' is lifted and replaced by 'light' and 'sunlight' (6-14) instead of progressing into darkness—the paradoxical nature of this temporal positioning emphasising how the speaker has moved beyond any recognisable orientation within time. Walcott, it is true, 'gives us a sense of infinity embodied in the language' (Brodsky qtd. in poets.org). This

evocation of transcendent experience is further heightened by Walcott's formal choices. His poem has no identifiable frame metre, is composed in speech rhythms, and eschews the strictures of a rhyme scheme. He thus creates a liberated language to reinforce the sense of transcendence—of escaping the restricting 'net' (2) of earthly obscurity—that his poem seeks to evoke. This said, Walcott nonetheless sporadically employs a rising metre (iambic), such as at the start of lines or in certain clauses, to echo the ascension of the birds and their song. He also employs an elevated poetic diction, such as through his use of evocative adjectives as in 'silvery ropes | that flashed in the icy sunlight' (13-14). This elevation of diction further reinforces the spiritual elevation described. However, it is not simply an ambiguous, undefined moment of transcendence that Walcott celebrates. Instead, similar to Mallarmé's suggestion that transcendence may be achieved through 'l'art' and 'la mysticité' (30), Walcott identifies this moment of transcendence with the experience of artistic beauty, love, and God.

The critic Sean O'Brien characterised Walcott's poetry as being concerned 'with art itself—its meaning and importance and the nature of an artistic vocation' (O'Brien qtd. in poetryfoundation.org), and *The Season of Phantasmal Peace* is no exception. The poem's moment of transcendence is identified with an experience of artistic beauty and explores art's capacity to offer us consolation, redemptively glorify life, connect us to something universal and timeless, and impart a degree of self-compassion. The creators of the speaker's experience are singers of a 'soundless' (Walcott 8) music—like the music of poetry when subvocalized—who also 'drew' (12) shapes in the air; they create 'this passage' (10) of phantasmal light, the lexical ambiguity of which creates a self-reflexive subtext; and engage in a 'peaceful' war (15)—reminiscent of the agonistic, Oedipal contest between artists described by Harold Bloom—that most people, regrettably, do not attend to (12). It is their song that frees earth from its net of obscurity and fills it with light and beauty; that is

compared to a mother guiding her child into the land of dreams (17-19); that manages to aspire to timelessness—'seasonless' and 'beyond all change' (28-32); that manages to embody something universal, proceeding from 'all the nations' (1); and that manages to express 'something brighter than pity' to those dwelling in 'dark holes' below (29-30), imparting a compassionate perspective on human life. It is therefore evident that the speaker's experience is to some degree an *aesthetic* experience, and exemplifies not some monolithic notion of what art ought to be, but instead what Walcott sees as particularly spiritually valuable about (some) art. The significance of art and music in this regard, then, is echoed in the very musicality of the verse. Walcott's lines are deeply cadenced and intertwine consonance and sibilance to not only mimic the carolling of the birds but also the noises they make as they cut through the air; with 'multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues' (line 3) exemplifying the former, and lines 5-6, with their smooth sibilants and sharp alveolar stops (eg. 'shadows of glass-faced towers'), exemplifying the latter.

Walcott also associates the transcendental experience with love. The instigators of the experience, the birds, are in flight and in song because they are undertaking their 'seasonal passing'—their migration—to find and reconcile with mates (27). Thus it is lovebirds that bring about the experience. And it is 'Love' released from all bounds, made 'seasonless' (28), that makes the experience uniquely special (22-28). Additionally, the 'peaceful' wars (15) of the starlings are not only reminiscent of the peaceful war of art, but also the peaceful 'war' of love—a trope perhaps most exhaustively explored in Ovid's *Love Poems*.

Furthermore, Walcott implies that the transcendent experience is a direct projection of the speaker's own feelings. Syntactic ambiguity allows the phrase, 'their seasonal passing, Love' (27), to signify both the love of the birds *as well as* that of the hearers (22-28), subtly implying that the mightiness (25) of the birdsong is actually due to its *audience's* overspilling of love, and that it is in fact a projection or 'objective correlative' (Eliot 59) of their own

sensations. Walcott does not only characterise this experience as lifting the net of shadows (2) and providing consolation (17-19), but also as providing transcendence. For instance, the line: ‘battalions of starlings waging peaceful cries’ (15), employs a form of ‘logopoeia’ (Pound 25)—the striking use of words out of their conventional usage-context—to reflect upon the experience of the ‘peaceful’ war of love as something beyond the predictable, routine everyday, or, in other words, as something transcendent. That these lovebirds should ascend ‘above all change’ (32) and instigate an experience with such a paradoxical relation to time, ultimately suggests that the love Walcott is celebrating shares some continuity with the divine.

Significantly, the transcendent experience described by *The Season of Phantasmal Peace* is to a large extent an encounter with, or a vision of, the divine. Walcott’s style is, after all, ‘a beautiful style that is also a philosophical style’ (Kirsch 2014), and this poem is no different. It thus presents an exploration of what Mallarmé might have termed ‘la mysticité’ (mysticism) (30). For a moment, the speaker sees beyond the distortion of the ego and the phenomenal world and into the truth of God’s grace and His ultimately beneficent cosmic order. The speaker is elevated beyond time, and the standard laws of the physical world are suspended as shadows are lifted away by birds, signalling the dismantling of the phenomenal world and the penetration into something beyond. ‘Shadows’, or *shades*, ascend with soul-like birds to the heavens—the lexical ambiguity of ‘passing’ (27) suggesting that they have passed on to the afterlife—all at last indiscriminately united (1) in one great song of boundless ‘Love’ (27), celebrating the liberation of earth (2). ‘Phantasmal light’ (10) appears. Birds of death—the ‘raven’, the ‘killdeer’, and the ‘ember-circling chough’ (23-24)—acting as emblems of a “nature red in tooth and claw”, are transformed (22-23) into carolers of love, ‘high concern’ (25), and compassion (29), as if the fundamental goodness of the redeemed cosmic order were at once revealed. The speaker’s ascension moves him gradually out of

time (32-35) towards the brink of eternity, ‘between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace’ (34). Thus the speaker’s encounter with divinity is not only an experience of God and his Creation, but of the New Jerusalem and the ultimate destiny God has planned for mortals.

In conclusion, Derek Walcott’s *The Season of Phantasmal Peace* presents an experience of transcendence that is figured in terms of artistic beauty, love, and God. In doing this, he succeeds in his ‘religious vocation’ by offering his readers an exploration of God and the Good to contemplate, as if it were a ‘prayer’ (Walcott qtd. in theparisreview.org). The experiences discussed are seen as providing significant consolation to a ‘world’ (16) whose fragility and vulnerability is emphasised by the poet’s repetition of ‘trembling’, in addition to a word with similar connotations, ‘fluttering’ (18-19). Nonetheless, despite providing intimations of eternity, they only last ‘one moment’ (33), their light is but ‘phantasmal’ (10), and so, all that one can do is cherish them for as long as they last.

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