

CRITICISM

VOLUME

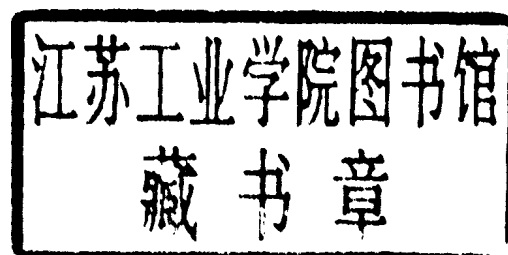
56

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 56

Janet Witalec
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism, Vol. 56

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 91-118494

ISBN 0-7876-7454-0
ISSN 1052-4851

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Edward Kamau Brathwaite

1930-

Contemporary Barbadian poet, playwright, literary critic, and scholar.

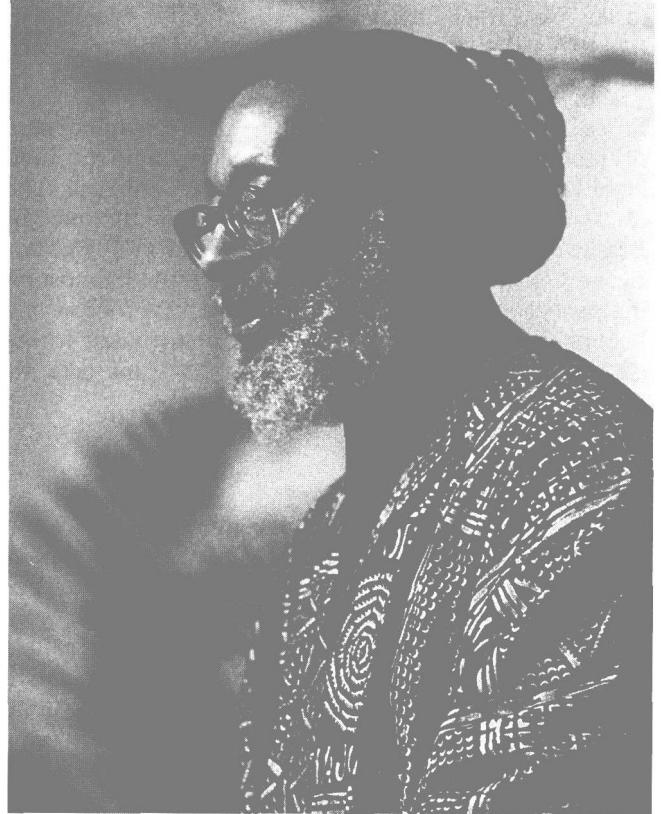
The following entry presents criticism of Brathwaite's poetry from 1968 through 2001.

INTRODUCTION

Brathwaite is one of the Caribbean's most honored writers. He is known chiefly for *The Arrivants* (1973), a trilogy of poetry volumes in which a uniquely Caribbean identity is set forth, incorporating ties to Africa and the lasting effects of slavery. Born in Barbados, Brathwaite has long been compared to another famous Caribbean poet, the Nobel Prize-winning Derek Walcott. Brathwaite was strongly influenced by the works of T. S. Eliot but his penchant for jazz, rhythmic experimentation, and his love of Caribbean vernacular are the most evident features of his poetry. His emphasis on the oral tradition in poetry has led him to produce several sound recordings. Holding positions at universities in the West Indies, England, and the United States, Brathwaite has had a distinguished academic career during which he has written and edited several highly respected works of criticism, essays, and scholarly histories of the Caribbean.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Brathwaite was born on May 11, 1930, in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. He attended the island's elite Harrison College, where he started a school newspaper to which he contributed essays about jazz. While at Harrison he also began publishing stories in *Bim*, an influential literary journal published in Barbados in which his writings would continue to appear for many years. In 1949 Brathwaite was awarded the Barbados Island Scholarship to Cambridge, where he studied history and English. He graduated with honors in 1953. After taking an additional year to earn a teaching certificate, in 1955 he joined the British colonial service and was posted on the Gold Coast, where he lived until 1962. While on the Gold Coast—which became Ghana during his time there—he held several civil service posts that put him into regular contact with the everyday people of West Africa, an experience that inspired his



poetry and informed much of his scholarly work. During his journeys to England and Africa, many of his poems and stories were broadcast on the BBC's *Caribbean Voices*.

On one visit home he met Doris Welcome, and in 1960 they were married. In 1962 Brathwaite left Ghana with his wife and infant son to take a position with the University of the West Indies. His return to the West Indies made him aware of many continuities between the cultures of rural Africa and the contemporary Caribbean. He began exploring these links in poems and chronicling them in scholarly writings. In 1965 he went to England to study at the University of Sussex, and in 1968 he was awarded a Ph.D. in history for research on slave and Creole culture in the Caribbean. As he embarked on his scholarly work, he also began to publish the poetry volumes eventually collected as *The Arrivants*. Published individually between 1967 and 1969, the three volumes of the *The Arrivants* garnered Brathwaite tremendous attention and praise. Brathwaite

began taking guest appointments at prestigious universities such as Harvard and Yale while receiving honors such as Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships, and, in 1994, the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Whereas Brathwaite's first trilogy celebrated what he termed "nation language," his second trilogy of poems, written in the 1970s, presents fragments of speech, society, and culture that reflect the folk culture brought to the West Indies by the African slaves. It was also in the 1970s that Brathwaite began publishing under the name Kamau, given to him in Ghana.

Since the 1980s Brathwaite has been engaged in a project to bring to light the cultural, linguistic, and historical links between Africa and the Caribbean. The mid- and late 1980s proved a very difficult time for Brathwaite, as his wife died in 1986 and in 1988 Hurricane Gilbert destroyed his home and buried almost all his papers in mud. Two years later he was robbed and beaten in Jamaica. These traumas contributed to his decision to leave the West Indies in 1991 and take his current position at New York University.

MAJOR WORKS

Brathwaite's poetry has been a continued examination and celebration of the cultural and linguistic continuities between Africa and the Caribbean. *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969), which were published in 1973 as *The Arrivants*, remain Brathwaite's most lauded and discussed works. The poems move from Africa and the myths of the Ashanti empire to the Caribbean. John Povey interprets them as descriptions of a search for identity by both Brathwaite individually and the peoples of the Caribbean collectively. The Jamaican poet and critic Mervyn Morris sees *The Arrivants* as "a major document of African reconnection" that "draws attention to Caribbean continuities out of Africa." *Other Exiles* (1975), which includes poems written from 1950 to the collection's release in 1975, is more personal and introspective than Brathwaite's "national language" poetry. In the 1970s and 1980s Brathwaite published *Mother Poem* (1977), *Sun Poem* (1982) and *X/Self* (1987), all of which comprise an unnamed trilogy that seeks to reveal the fragmentary, historical links between Africa and the Caribbean. More disjointed and reliant on puns and wordplay, these poems reveal Brathwaite's debt to jazz masters such as Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. His most recent works have become more abstract, as is his *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1993), written in response to the death of his wife.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Early in his career, Brathwaite was repeatedly compared with another famous Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott. Patrica Ismond concludes that Walcott is the better

craftsman, a type of "poet's poet," but she praises Brathwaite for taking on the role of representative figure for the people of the West Indies, and for representing "their collective destiny." Indeed, most criticism of Brathwaite focuses on themes such as the continuities between Africa and the Caribbean or Brathwaite's cyclical theory of history and culture. Many critics do close readings of Brathwaite's poems to unearth the shards of African culture Brathwaite includes in his works. Simon Gikandi and others conclude that "oral languages take revenge against institutionalized poetic forms," and Norman Weinstein traces the influence of jazz in Brathwaite's work. Nana Wilson-Tague describes Brathwaite's poetry as a "mode of apprehension, in which the writer seeks community and image through a drama of consciousness." The vast majority of Brathwaite's critics celebrate his poetry for its rhythms and evocations of the African past in the Caribbean present.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Rights of Passage 1967
Masks 1968
Islands 1969
The Arrivants 1973
Other Exiles 1975
Days and Nights 1975
Black and Blues 1976
Mother Poem 1977
Soweto 1979
Word Making Man: A Poem for Nicolas Guillen 1979
Sun Poem 1982
Third World Poems 1983
Jah Music 1986
X/Self 1987
Shar 1990
Middle Passages 1992
Trenchtown Rock 1993
The Zea Mexican Diary 1993
Barabajan Poems, 1942-1992 1994
Words Need Love Too 2000
Ancestors 2001

Other Major Works

Odale's Choice (play) 1967
Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica (history) 1970
 revised edition, 1981

The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820 (history) 1971
Caribbean Man in Space and Time (history) 1974
Contradictory Omens (history) 1974
National Language Poetry (essays) 1982
History of the Voice (history) 1984
Roots (essays) 1986

CRITICISM

Jean D'Costa (essay date September 1968)

SOURCE: D'Costa, Jean. "Poetry Review." *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 3 (September 1968): 24-8.

[In the following essay, the author compares Brathwaite to Virgil and focuses on themes of exile.]

It is significant that before Brathwaite the poet comes Brathwaite the historian. Only a historian could create so intimately and fully the world of *Rights of Passage* and *Masks*. This world is one we know well: that of the negro in the western hemisphere. But while others like Césaire and Baldwin have treated this world fragment by fragment, Edward Brathwaite attempts a synthesis of a splintered, shattered area of experience, and manages to bind together in a single poetic vision both Louisiana and Brixton, the Golden Stool of the Asante and the slums of Harlem. In *Rights of Passage* we are shown the panorama in time and space of the exile and wanderings of the negro. In *Masks*, which completes our understanding of *Rights* . . . , we are shown the world from which the transported slave came: a world which he now regards with some romanticism, some indifference, and much ignorance. Both books consist of lyric poems which develop a central theme, each poem an essential link in the argument of the whole. Such is the forcefulness of Brathwaite's vision in these thematic poems, that one is quite unable to set either book aside without reading to the end. This is not to say that the writing is all equally good, but that one is compelled to go with the poet through a series of interpretations and visions, and to pass judgement on the whole.

Rights of Passage introduces us first of all to the African homeland in the days before the slave trade. Brathwaite invokes a setting and a mood with Virgilian sharpness:

Drum skin whip
 lash, master sun's
 cutting edge of
 heat, taut

surfaces of things
 I sing
 I shout
 I groan
 I dream
 about

Dust glass grit
 the pebbles of the desert:

In tracing the path of the exiled negro through time and space, Brathwaite is doing the same as Virgil in the *Aeneid*. Like Virgil, he evokes deep race memories, associations with a culture long past, yet still active in the present. The homeland which is recalled here is no sentimentalised paradise, nor is it a clear-cut, well-documented thing. Cruelty, death, betrayal are all known. Hardship is familiar. What is suggested is a mood, an echo of a life of which the conscious memories are lost, and only the subliminal remain:

Grant, God,
 a clear release from thieves,
 from robbers and from those that
 plot and poison while they dip
 into our dish.

Flame,
 that red idol, is our power's
 founder: flames fashion wood; with
 powder, iron. Long iron
 runs to swords,
 to spears, to burnished points
 that stall the wild, the eyes, the
 whinneyings.
 Flame is our god, our last defence,
 our peril.
 Flame burns the village down.

A variety of symbols work upon the two underlying themes: death and regeneration. In all stages of *Rights*, these balancing symbols recur. In a sense they make the agony of transportation and deprivation more acute, for returning life is a sore trial to a broken and diseased organism:

for our blood, mixed
 soon with their passion in sport

in indifference, in anger,
 will create new soils, new souls, new
 ancestors; will flow like this tide
 fixed

to the star by which this ship floats
 to new worlds, new waters, new
 harbours, the pride of our ancestors
 mixed

with the wind and the water
 the flesh and the flies, the whips . . .

The death and rebirth of natural forms parallels and emphasises man's subjection to the same forces: "So many seeds / the cotton breeds / so many seeds / our fathers

need." This constant balancing of positive and negative poles gives both passion and a kind of honesty to the mythical world of *Rights*. Assonance, alliteration, and the unexpected internal rhyme point the movement of feeling and argument.

In the section 'New World A-Comin' ' the psychology of exile and enslavement is explored. There is a neat suggestion of the incompatibility of the cultures of slave and slaver in the lines

. . . we journeyed
to this place
to this meeting
this shock
and shame
in the soiled
silence.

The moral problem implied here will haunt us through the whole book. Tom, a symbolic figure introduced later in this section, becomes the focus of the problem, and the centre of conflict in which the forces of death and regeneration meet. The nostalgia for the lost homeland is transformed into a new nostalgia for a new land which can never replace the other, and yet gains a hold on the exile that cannot be denied. The emotional crisis of the homeless is stated in a manner which stresses the nature of the amputation:

for we who have achieved nothing
work
who have not built
dream
who have forgotten all
dance
and dare to remember

the paths we shall never remember
again: Atumpan talking and the
harvest branches, all the tribes of
Ashanti dreaming the dream of
Tutu, Anokye, and the Golden
Stool, built in Heaven for our
nation by the work of
lightning and the brilliant adze:
and now nothing

nothing
nothing

so let me sing
nothing
now

From here we move on to the changed attitude of later generations, Tom's children born in the land of captivity, knowing no other. The hope expressed for them by him "hoping my children's eyes / will learn / not green alone / not Africa alone / not dark alone / not fear / alone . . .", this evaporates in the compromises of a new era. The slave and slaver are now face to face,

each inevitably corrupting the other, neither able to understand nor escape from the consequences of the situation:

Boss man lacks pride:
so hides his
fear of fear and darkness
in the whip.

Boss man lacks pride:
I am his hide

of darkness. Bide
the black times, Lord, hide
my heart from the lips
that spit . . .

This is the bitter statement of slavery at its height. It is presumably what Wilberforce and Lincoln fought against, though it is doubtful that they could have had much real insight into the nightmare they opposed. The humiliation and degradation are stated through the persona of Tom, no longer the floundering, founding father, but the enigmatic witness of corruption:

They laugh and the white
man laughs: each
wishing for mercy, each
fearful of mercy, teach-
ing their children to hate
their skin to its bitter root in the
bone.

In these passages there are echoes of the spirituals, and of the Biblical language that is so much a part of the English-based negro creoles. At its best the language is evocative of that stage of negro culture which is being rapidly swallowed up by late twentieth century values. Sometimes the mood is jarred by a weakening of the language, or a lowering of intensity. Occasionally a note of banality creeps in:

'But to hell with this, nuncle!
You fussy black Uncle
Tom, hat in your hand!

The pressure builds up again as we follow the wanderings of the Negro in the days after emancipation. These are the days of migration to Panama, Cuba, New York and the northern industrial cities of the United States. Their pathos and futility are captured in the lines

. . . In my small hired
room, stretched out upon the New
York Herald Tribune, pages
damp from dirty lots, from locked
out parks, from gutters; dark, tired,
deaf, cold, too old to care to catch
alight the quick match of your pity,
I died alone, without the benefit of
fire.

Now the exile is an infinitely complex thing, embracing journeys to any country or state that seems to offer

security. No place is home, and everywhere varieties of sorrow and sickness show themselves. The later generations of our century, our grandfathers and fathers, adapt in various ways. Negro art becomes fashionable; negroes are acknowledged great sportsmen and great musicians (jazz only). A multitude of neuroses develop, and beneath all is the restless homelessness expressed in the poem 'Journeys'.

The many cultures of the West Indian islands, of the Deep South and the northern urban ghettos are explored in the latter poems. Here, bound together by a common theme of bewilderment and frustration, are the people of the shanty towns of Kingston, Port of Spain, and Harlem. Social alienation produces its hallucinatory compensations; and the Rasta

. . . beard full of lichens
brain full of lice
watched the mice
come up through the floor-
boards of his down-
town, shanty-town kitchen,
and smiled. Blessed are the poor
in health, he mumbled,
that they should inherit
this wealth. Blessed are the meek
hearted, he grumbled,
for theirs is this stealth.

The Rasta passage rings true as a sample of the linguistic and mental processes of that group. Some of the other passages in different dialects are less successful. This may partly be the result of poetic composition in an unfamiliar dialect, and the use of poetic transformations which do not match the vernacular on which they are based. The last poem in Part II is full of these minor linguistic weaknesses, which yet do not interfere significantly with our grasp of the spiritual and social dislocation they express.

Irony and satire, the weapons of contemporary negro society, are explored as Brathwaite looks at the life of the calypsonian, the Brixton migrant, the bank clerk on the make, the Black Muslim, and the small shopkeeper. The poem in Barbadian dialect attempts something akin to the satire and humour of Louise Bennett. Still the themes of regeneration and death, of despair and hope, persist, though submerged. It is this balance of opposites which keeps *Rights of Passage* above the level of raw propaganda, and denies the reader any easy sentimental escape. In 'Postlude Home' is a statement of the climax of the journeys, the confusion, the fear, the bitterness, and bewilderment which marked the last three centuries:

For we
who have cre-

ated nothing,
must exist

on nothing;
cannot see

the soil:
good

earth, God's
earth, with-

out that fixed
locked mem-

ory of love-
less toil

Now the beginning of it all it just an echo

I is find meself
wonderin' if

Tawia Tutu Anokye or
Tom could'a ever

have live
such a life.

The epilogue does more than recall the beginning of the cycle of history. It closes with a statement which draws together the contraries that have been expressed throughout, and makes of them both a promise and a threat, a beginning and an end. The final couplet of the book reads

There is no
turning back.

There is that inevitability of development in *Rights of Passage* which all successful art must have. One is carried along in spite of one's self, and in the end one can look back on a journey of the mind, which has transformed and illuminated the commonplace and the known. There is no easy label for this kind of poetry. If such a writer could emerge to unite in a single vision the disasters and divisions of the Vietnamese people or the confusions and conflicts of the people of Red China, then one might feel that the disunity of the past was ending, if not that of the future. Brathwaite's ability to see the many journeys of the last three centuries as a related whole more is than the freakish vision of one man. Poets seize upon what is real, but latent and formless in their times, and give these things voice and brightness. Myth-makers, they bring before the conscious mind dreams and notions that have been shaping in the subconscious of generations. They cannot create richly without that gestative past in which countless men and women have lived, and felt, and done what is now memory and tradition, and the substance of myth.

The spirit of *Rights of Passage* is carried over into *Masks*, as the prefatory quotation suggests:

"Only the fool points at his origins
with his left hand." Akan Proverb.

We are plunged at once into a celebration of West African culture, as it is lived and felt from within by those native to that area. Instead of the symbols of exile, fire, disease, springing vegetation and dry sand, there are the many musical instruments and their parallels in nature. The animism of West African culture is boldly expressed:

There is a quick
stick grows in the for-
est, blossoms twice year-
ly without leaves;
bare white branches
crack like light-
ening in the harm-
attan.

But no harm
comes to those who live near-
by. This tree, the
elders say, will never
die.

There is a sense of the unity and interrelatedness of all things, a linking of the quick and the dead, which cannot be satisfactorily expressed by the term animism. West African cultures have shown in a variety of forms this sense of the interdependence of things. In "**The Gong-gong**" it is not a philosophy, but a living reality:

God is dumb
until the drum
speaks.

The drum
is dumb
until the gong-gong leads

it. Man made,
the gong-gong's
iron eyes

of music
walk us through the humble
dead to meet

the dumb
blind drum
where Odomankoma speaks.

As in *Rights* . . . the spirit of each generation, each group was evoked by varieties of language and dialect, so the richness and variety of the life set out in *Masks* is made real by a telling use of West African languages and names. Brathwaite has a sensitive ear for the rhythms and melodies of language, and his use of terms from the Akan dialects is elegant and exciting:

Odomankoma 'Kyerema says
Odomankoma 'Kyerema says

The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says

The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says

that he has come from sleep
that he has come from sleep
and is rising
and is rising

like akoko the cock
like akoko the cock who clucks
who crows in the morning
who crows in the morning

There is much more to the music of these exotic terms than one might at first expect. As we are taken, poem by poem, into the depths of West African life, we find that the language creates an insight into past and present, showing the limitations of the Western negro returned 'home', and the blend of strangeness and familiarity in his experience.

It is the strangeness that strikes one first. The land has forgotten the exiles, has lived on past their going with other thoughts. The series '**Pathfinders**' brings to us the vastness and variety of the life of West Africa. The exiled negro seems a small thing in the endless reaches of forest and desert, river and lake. In it all there is the muted theme of the smallness and greatness of man, building, destroying, breeding, dying, planting, and reaping. '**Chad**' sets out in cold, clear terms the enigma of existence:

This sacred lake
is the soul
of the world;

winds whirl
born in the soul
of this dark water's world.

This lake
moulds
the wars of the world;

no peace in this world
till the soul
knows this dark water's

world.

In this world strife and disorder have a prominent place, and the butterflies of decay and rebirth appear to emphasise the basic oneness of this world with all others. The bitterness of *Rights* . . . is absent, and in its place instead is a futility all the more pernicious as it has no overt focus:

. . . the gold returns
to dust, the walls

we raised return again

to dust; and what sharp winds,
teeth'd with the desert's sand,
rise in the sun's day

brilliance where our mosques
mock ignorance, mock pride,
burn in the crackled blaze of time,
return again to whispers, dust.

The Arab element in West African culture appears, a feature alien and exotic to the non-native. 'Volta' sums up the alienness, the vastness and the little-known tragedies of West African history:

For miles the land was bare and dry
for miles clear sky

and rock; three days we travelled,
dreaming; heavy tongues dumb,
soles and our ankles numb,
foreheads shocked with heat.
The land was empty and the

rainless arch of nothing stretching
stretched straight on.

The writing in *Masks* has little of the vernacular intimacy of *Rights of Passage*. This is inevitable, for the experience of *Masks* is that of the observer, not that of the member of the group. In the section 'Limits' we traverse the length and breadth of West Africa, and are made to sense the qualities of space and change which make it what it is. This is essentially an examination from without, and it is also an experiment on many levels. In 'Volta' quoted above, the tension and labour of this part of West African life are made real in the rhythms and assonances of the writing. The strong musical rhythms of the opening poems express the values and joys of a culture alien to us. The experiment brings us into the heart of things, and shows how close and yet remote that heart is. There is the danger here that the very alienness of the culture threatens the verse with obscurity, yet the forcefulness of the imagery, the symbols of water, river, journey, labour, forest, field and family sustain the flow of argument.

Real tension comes in 'The Return'. This is Asante country, from which oral tradition claims that most of the West Indian negroes came. This is the classic sentimental journey, the search for another self who preceded the present self. But the mirror is blank, and no familiar face looks back from its surface:

I tossed my net
but the net caught
no fish

I dipped a wish
but the well
was dry

Beware
Beware
Beware

Oddly enough, the writing loses something of its pungency and certainty in this section. But even so the urgency of the theme dominates even the weakest passages, and the hypnotic quality of the verse expresses the feeling of unreality, of failure, of bewilderment:

I travelled to a distant town
I could not find my mother
I could not find my father
I could not hear the drum

Whose ancestor am I?

This is the turning point of *Masks*. The true search is now over, and from this we must move on to looking at the homeland as it now is, in itself, in its own right, a thing completely apart from the returning stranger. The poem 'Masks' tells the real sorrow of that world, a sorrow which the stranger shares because he is of the family of man:

Your tree
has been split
by a white axe
of lightning;
the wise
are di-
vided, the
eyes
of our elders
are dead.

Estrangement, exile, division are man's lot: the section ends with a statement of the universality of oblivion and loss.

The last two sections of *Masks* are 'Crossing the River' and 'Arrival'. Like Bunyan's Pilgrim, the exile has looked at his world, and at his imagined home, and must face both himself and his true environment. The rhythms of invocation and dance are very marked in the last two sections. The writing takes on a ritual quality, as it strives to express the hope of reconciliation and healing. The image of water the cleanser, the healer, the life force, expresses the nature of this final stage of the search. Water in Asante culture has many symbolic values, and the word 'nsuo' is the base form for terms such as milk, blood, fish, and river. The poem 'Sunsum' (spiritual blood, literally *su nsu*) sums up the meaning of the return to West Africa: "Welcome your brother now / my trapped curled tongue / still cries". But the hard truth is that there can be no answer to the plea for welcome, and whatever hope there is must exist in spite of the unalterable facts of alienation and oblivion:

The years remain
silent: the dust learns nothing

with listening;

.

the termites' dark teeth, three

hundred years working,
have patiently ruined my art.

Death, loss and despair are the themes of 'Sunsum' and 'Tano', and we are made to feel even more acutely than in *Rights of Passage* what is the real meaning of homelessness, of rootlessness and isolation from family. In 'The Awakening' only the basic forces of life remain to offer hope of help: the earth, the light of day, and those spiritual energies symbolised in the Divine Drummer. As in *Rights of Passage* there "was no turning back", so in *Masks* the essential power of man to be himself, to find himself, is stated as a duty, sacred and inevitable:

so slowly slowly
ever so slowly

I will rise
and stand on my feet

slowly slowly
ever so slowly

I will rise
and stand on my feet.

Like akoko the cock
like akoko the cock

who cries
in the early dawn

akoko bon'opa
akoko tua bon

I am learning
let me succeed

I am learning
let me succeed. . . .

Patricia Ismond (essay date September-December 1971)

SOURCE: Ismond, Patricia. "Walcott Versus Brathwaite." *Caribbean Quarterly* 17, nos. 3-4 (September-December 1971): 54-71.

[In the following essay, Ismond revisits and reconsiders a once-common comparison between Brathwaite and Derek Walcott. She finds Walcott by far the better craftsman.]

Since Edward Lucie-Smith's pronouncement that the West Indies must choose between Walcott and Brathwaite, there has arisen something of a controversy about

these two figures. There is a sense in which this kind of quarrel was inevitable in the present atmosphere of liberation, and one of the first things that needs to be established is that it is not an irrelevant question within this context. Some attempt has been made to resolve the issue by pointing out that it is futile to attempt a comparison when the two are obviously doing such widely different things. Those who take this position have not, as far as I can gather, tried to examine the differences if only to prove their point. Others think that the whole thing falls into place when we see them as complementary rather than opposed. This is the view that Rohlehr expresses in his essay on *Islands*, entitled "The Poet as Historian."¹ Here again no one has really ventured to show in what ways they are complementary. There remains, as a result, a great deal of indeterminacy surrounding this matter, and it has tended to give rise to a Brathwaite faction versus a Walcott. It is obvious that behind this state of affairs is an issue that needs to be faced. Either, on the one hand, there are deficiencies in the poets concerned that makes this an authentic cleavage. Or, on the other hand, there are limitations in the attitudes of the audience that get in the way of a proper appreciation. There are accordingly, ghosts that need to be laid, and the effort to come to terms with these issues becomes necessary.

The cliché attitudes towards these two poets must be taken as starting points, because behind every cliché attitude is a hard core of significance which must be the true target of any such argument. Brathwaite is hailed as the poet of the people, dealing with the historical and social themes that define the West Indian dilemma. Walcott is a little more difficult to place—appears at times to pay passing attention to these matters, but more consistently he seems to be a type of poet's poet, the kind of luxury we can ill afford, and which remains Eurocentric. The European literary postures he continues to assume are evidence enough of this. These are the stock attitudes, and it is quite clear that Walcott does get the worse of the deal. Those who, recognising some undeniable strength and relevance in his work, have risen to his defence, have not really dealt adequately with the essential Walcott. Mervyn Morris, for example, in trying to show that Walcott is indeed concerned with the problems of his environment, cites only those poems which deal overtly with the themes of the colonial and middle-passage experience.² In bringing these two poets together, therefore, it would be dishonest not to recognise at once that it is Walcott above all that needs to be vindicated. At the same time, the true nature of Brathwaite's achievement has been somehow blurred by the very excesses of the enthusiasm with which he has been hailed. Walcott, as a craftsman, towers far above Brathwaite, but I think this is a matter that can be temporarily put aside in a consideration of the content of their works and the type of sensibility that emerges in each case. It seems to me, moreover, that our best appreciation of