

The formation of the 'I' through the 'Eye' in Derek Walcott's Poetry

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Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself as an image; you never use your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon, in the mirror or the lens, (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you) . . . you are condemned to the repertoire of its images.

Roland Barthes

Vision never leaves the body, but sits at its margins or only leaves it when the eye is thrown away and the world becomes encapsulated in a broader metaphoric range: my self, the hole where my eye was, and the eye lying across the room.

Sarah Stanbury

On a closer analysis of Derek Walcott's poems (1948-84), it gradually becomes evident that the poet's gaze in recreating space also initiates a complex process of identification. This paper seeks to examine how Walcott self consciously uses shiny, transparent and opaque surfaces to generate a series of images of the Self in various contexts of the past and present. The 'eye' thus becomes an instrument for the formation of the "I". In the course of this study I will draw upon Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the Gaze and in particular upon the Mirror Stage of Identification. Lacan's theory restricts itself mainly to man-made mirrors. However,

Walcott's gaze is reflected, refracted and penetrates not only man made surfaces such as mirrors, windowpanes, sunglasses and microscopes, but also natural mirrors such as the sea, pools of standing lagoon water and even the human eyes.

The quest for identity is a major preoccupation in Derek Walcott's poetry (1948-84) perhaps on account of his mixed descent. Bruce King in Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life traces the complex family tree of Walcott (7-20). His paternal grand father was an Englishman who had come from Barbados to purchase a plantation in Choiseul, where he met a local brown woman who was a native of St. Lucia. Their first child Warrick (Walcott's father), was born out of wedlock and was light skinned. He was refused legitimacy in Barbados. Walcott's maternal grandfather was Dutch, and in addition to this most of the other women in his family were of African descent. In "The Schooner Flight", Shabine, the hero, is in fact Walcott in that he says, "I'm just a red nigger who love the sea, /I had a sound colonial education, /I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,/And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation"(346). Walcott's relationship to his immediate environment was no less complex because he was a native English Methodist in a predominantly Catholic St. Lucia. And found himself writing English literature on a Francophone island. Thus his dilemma was that he was black, but culturally raised white (King 5).

All these factors suggest that for Walcott, exploring the formation of the 'I', would help him come to terms with the mixed identity of the Caribbean itself. Thus by gazing at and through mirrors and glass (both artificial and natural), he embarks on an identification process which rivals Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory.

In a personal interview, Dr. Munawar Ahmad Chaudhry from the Niaz Memorial Hospital Lahore stated that psychological research identifies at least six different types of the gaze which characterize various personality types (see Appendix G). However, it is Jacques Lacan's concept of the gaze which poses one of the strongest and most comprehensive arguments for identification. The theory

advocates that the 'mirror stage' of infantile life is critical in the establishment of identity.

Lacan hypothesized that human beings are in search of completeness or wholeness since birth, and it is the mirror in which the infant finds an illusion of this unity ("The Gaze in Art" 1). Walcott's fragmented personality also seems to be in search of wholeness, and he often resorts to examining his self image in large and small sized mirrors. He writes in "The Schooner Flight", that "I look in the rearview mirror and see a man /exactly like me, and the man was weeping / for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island" (345). And in "A Village Life", he notes that, "Your image rattled on the subway glass / is my own death mask in an over coat" (80).

The examination of him self, continues throughout his collection of poetry (1948-84) as in "Nearing Forty" the onset of cataract in the eye becomes the metaphor for a clouding of memory and an isolating sense of enclosure. He writes, "I am nearing forty, nearer the weak / vision thickening to a frosted pane" (136). And whereas the poet will not miss an opportunity to examine his image in someone's sunglasses, the wearer of the glasses blocks out recognition. This is evident in "The Spoilers Return" where he says, "and those with hearing aids turn off the truth, / and their dark glasses let you criticize / your own presumptuous image in their eyes. . . / and black still poor, though black is beautiful" (433-4).

Lacan in The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience states that a child between 6-18 months can recognize his own image in the mirror, "and fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning - forward position in order to hold it in his gaze brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image" (190). Interestingly, the child's own image then produces an ambivalent response. The infant feels attracted to the image as an ideal and yet simultaneously feels repulsed because the real is not the ideal. In this moment of recognition the child sees all the parts of its body at the same time. Previously its knowledge about its body had only been a partial apprehension of the constitution of a

'somebody'. The recognition of itself is often joyous in that the child imagines its mirror image to be more complete than its own body, and thus often we witness the child's common gesture of reaching out to it joyfully. But recognition is replaced by misrecognition since the image reflected in the mirror is conceived to be the reflected body of the self and thus superior. This would project the child's body outside itself as an ideal ego. It is in this infantile gaze and the returned mirror gaze of identification that the child's 'imaginary' is born. Often, as the mother is present to support or hold the child when it looks into the mirror, the infant seeks in her gaze a recognition of his new found identity and from this look begins what Lacan calls 'the symbolic' ("The Gaze in Art" 2).

Interestingly, often when Walcott is gazing in his poems, a woman is also present in whose gaze he seeks an element of recognition. In "The Schooner Flight", Shabine is gazing at the mirror of the sea in the fresh light after a storm and says, "I saw the veiled face of Maria Concepcion / marrying the ocean, then drifting away / . . . I wanted nothing after that day" (360). Sometimes the woman becomes the mirror itself as the sleeping Anna does in "A Simple Flame" Chapter XIII, Section 3, "her golden body like a lamp blown out / that holds, just blown, the image of the flame" (228). On another occasion Walcott and Anna go for an afternoon walk in Chapter XIV, Section 2 of the same poem titled "Anna Awakening". They see their reflections in the lagoon's, "dark waters lens . . . / arranged to frame this pair whose pace / unknowingly measured loss / each face was set towards it character"(235-6). And Walcott concludes in "Brise Marine", "I cannot watch bright water but think of her" (43). The woman's absence thus becomes a presence in itself. And past associations come alive in the present.

Lacan opines that throughout life the two gaze oriented concepts of the 'symbolic' and the 'imaginary' generate a conflict and tension in the human psyche ("The Gaze in Art" 2). Walcott too states in "The Flock", "Till its annihilation may the mind / reflect his fixity through winter, tropic, / until that equinox when the clear eye / clouds, like a mirror without contradiction" (78).

The process of self gazing or self viewing in Walcott is generative of change. It establishes the poet's relationship not only with himself but also with his environment. Thus:

We have to understand the mirror stage as an identification in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image - whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory of the ancient term 'imago'. (Lacan 190)

In Walcott's poems the transformation that occurs in the poet when he gazes upon himself as an image, often occurs through natural mirrors, such as standing water or even the human eyes. In "Origins" there is a self conscious effort at this sort of transformation as he says, "Among these shallows I seek my own name and a man"(14), and, "I stare into black water by whose hulls / Heaven is rocked like a cradle" (449).

Unlike the child gazing in Lacan, Walcott's gaze penetrates his Caribbean multiracial identity in search of ancestral roots. The water reflecting his image thus acts like a kind of transfer projecting him into various settings against which his identity is matched to environment. Sometimes the reflection deliberately acts as an erasure of memory so that the poet's self identity can be examined neutrally against a blank setting. This allows him the freedom to assume whatever image or identity he pleases. In Walcott, unlike Lacan, the gaze is not just directed into a future search for identity, but also inwards and into the past. The psychologist examines the process of the formation of the I in the present and the future. The poet, on the other hand, searches for answers in the distant and recent past, not only of man, but of an entire nation.

Sometimes the poet's own eyes become the mirror for a narcissist gaze as in, "Magical lagoon, stunned / by its own reflection!" (228). Therefore the function of the mirror stage of identification becomes a valuable asset in illustrating the function of the 'imago', "Which

is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality - or as they say between the Innenwelt [the inner world] And the Umwelt [the surrounding world]" (Lacan 192). Thus like Lewis Carroll's Alice, in Through the Looking Glass, Walcott, also in search of self identity, in "Mid Summer" says, "At Queens Park hotel, with its white, high ceilinged rooms / I re-enter my first local mirror" (471). Lacan summarizes the mirror stage as:

caught up in a lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from the fragmented body image to a form of its totality. . . and lastly to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subjects entire mental development. Thus to break out of its circle of the Innenwelt into the Umwelt, generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications. (192)

Experience and observation indicate that in a child, sense perception precedes the recognition of the agent of perception. Thus infantile gazing is naturally 'impersonal'. Seeing at this early stage does not establish a connection between the subject and the object, because the subject is not aware of its own existence or the source of location of the gaze. This valuable aspect of infant gazing is replicated by Walcott to generate a detached and conscious dislocation as in "The Divided Child" Chapter I , Section 2 where he says, "the white face/of a dead child stared from its window frame" (149). The word 'stared' hints at the lack of comprehension in the child's gaze and sets the observer apart from its own observed image. As a poet, such a dislocation would facilitate dispassionate viewing of a landscape, and of people haunted by years of racial discrimination in a post-colonial setting. This self conscious alienation also fuels his artistic creativity. Fred D' Aguiar in his article titled, Ambiguity without a Crisis? Twin Traditions,

the Individual and Community in Derek Walcott's Essays corroborates this with, "Walcott's sense of dissociation generates a creative tension that feeds his poetry"(159). And Walcott himself in What the Twilight Says explains, "In that simple schizophrenic boyhood one could lead two lives: the interior life of poetry, the outward life of action and dialect" (25). Thus the act of gazing becomes a type of 'seeing' or 'looking' that is impersonal in its viewing of the object and in this process displaces or de-centers the subject.

In his discussion on the process of identification Lacan talks about the pre-existence of a gaze. He explains that, "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides . . . We are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world" (qtd in Barglow 3). In Walcott's poems, the eyes of others, such as tourists to the Caribbean islands, are also an integral part of this type of identification. The Caribbean man is characterized by the gaze of others which reflects preconceived images tainted by racial superiority "in the blue reflection of eyes" (3). The "ardent binoculars" (3), used to bring the seer closer to the seen, only seems to increase the distance between the Colonized and the Colonizer, and maintain a discreet separateness of being. At other times, it is the gaze of others which facilitates self recognition through a discovery of a common identity as in, "We saw within their eyes / we thought, an artist's ghost" (221). A similar idea is voiced by Merleau-Ponty in The Visible and Invisible as, "it is not I who sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous invisibility inhabits both of us" (qtd in Barglow 3). Thus the process of self conscious gazing is extended beyond the inner Caribbean self as a product of past multiracial immigrations, to the outer world and pre-existing European conceptions of cultural identity.

In Walcott's poetry (1948-84) there are not only numerous human eyes but even the landscape has eyes, so much so that, "When the sun goes slowly blind "(133) he notes that every leaf acquires sight, "it is a tree branched with cries, / a trash can full of print. / Now, through the reddening squint / of leaves leaden as eyes". (133)

It becomes gradually obvious that the poet's surveillance of landscape triggers off a multiplicity of gazes which look back at him. However, instead of leading to an uncomfortable fragmentation under such close scrutiny by one's native environment, these natural gazes have a soothing and healing effect. The landscape, in gazing back, provides an identification through recognition. The gazes acknowledge the relationship of the part to the whole, and the whole to the part.

An important aspect of Lacan's theory of identification is the negation of the dualism of subject and object. He uses the metaphor of the Moebius strip, a circular band, twisted and turned in such a manner that it does not have a clearly recognisable interior or exterior surface (qtd in Barglow 6). This represents the private and public sides of subjectivity. Thus subject and object though inherently separate are paradoxically two sides of the same coin. To illustrate this point let us take an example. In terms of expressing an opinion among a group of people I can refer to the subjective, "I believe . . ." Yet I can also use the objective form to include my opinion in the expression of disagreement amongst a group of people as, "only two people disagreed . . ." This paradoxical coexistence of the subjective and objective may be illustrated with a reference to the realm of photography. A snapshot of me would be an objective view of myself - the indirect gaze of the camera. It would thus be an image of me as seen by others which would, as a source of identification, be very important to me. Yet, at the same time when I look at my picture I would find that perhaps it lacks a particular aspect of my character and thus the 'me' is not really in the photograph at all. In which case the camera would be the equivalent of the gaze, since I as the subject, would be missing in the snapshot.

A close scrutiny of Walcott's poems yields scattered examples of photography and the gaze of the camera as a significant determinant of the identification process. He often assumes the position, "Like an archaic photographer, hooded in shade, / he crouches, screwing a continent to his eye" (115). Walcott thus shapes reality through his photographic gaze. Although he is not photographing himself, his

gaze determines what others will see. The poet therefore enjoys a supremacy in that the recipient of the photograph, or the reader of the poem, would be forced to look at reality and perhaps even himself through the poet's eyes. In this way Walcott can forge a new identity for himself compelling others to look through his gaze at Caribbean landscape and people.

Besides assuming the vantage point of the photographer, Walcott also at times gazes at photographs framing profiles. He writes ". . . now as I watch / this twinkling hoarfrost photograph / of the silvery old man bundled, silent, ice glint" (216). And in "A Simple Flame" Chapter XV, he says, "your gaze haunts innumerable photographs" (237). Interestingly, the gaze of the viewer is returned by the gaze of the 'still' characters in the photos. Lacan also draws upon photography to explain that, "What determines me at the most profound level in the visible, is the gaze that is outside . . . the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied, and through which . . . in a fragmented form I am photographed" (qtd in Barglow 5). Thus, just as our self identity is reinforced by the opinion of others, in the same manner, the gaze of others determines how we look at ourselves.

All these examples illustrate the poet's rendering of a quadrangular type of gazing entailed in photography. This involves the eye of the camera, the photographer's gaze looking through the camera, the returned gaze of the person/people in the photo, and of course the viewer looking at the final finished end product: the snapshot. Therefore the photograph becomes a framing device which facilitates the identification process through impersonality, dissociation and displacement.

Another framing device which is used to the same effect in Walcott's poems (1948-84) is the gazing through windows, or panes of glass. His poems abound with, "the shut eyes of windows" (156), "windows from a train" (462) and "bus window" (184), as well as window panes which are often opaque with frost, or glazed with moisture and mist. Gazing through windows thus begins as a deceptively simple process of establishing perspective

of landscape or seascape. In “Mid Summer” he writes, “There was a mist on the window. I rubbed it and/ looked out at helmets of wet cars in the parking/ lot”(48). This type of gazing at perspective through a frame is also found in another Caribbean poet Kamau Braithwaite's “Indigone” in which he says, ”The window in the little redwood gallery where I'd /sit for hours watching the cane fields groom, the/ black birds march across the road”(96). And sometimes the window pane in addition to being the frame for the viewers gaze, becomes the observer itself as in Mahadai Das' “Sonnet to New Flowers”, as ”Windows with broken glass stare, token gazes /sent from iron fisted buildings” (76). From these examples it becomes obvious that framing is an important part of the Caribbean poet’s artistic development because it becomes a device used for securing present and past memory.

When Walcott gazes through windows panes of glass, a type of emotional framing also occurs. Two types of emotions are predominantly framed in perspective: the positive and the negative. Ned Thomas in Obsession and Personality writes:

Behind the image of the window lies
the image of a house, a settlement, a
sense of security ,possibly even of
tradition. Walcott's window . . .
suggests a vantage point from which
reality can be approached in
confidence and security. (87-8)

But this is not always so ,because in “The Gulf” Walcott looks out of an aeroplane window on an American interstate flight to observe, ”The cold glass darkens . . . /I watch the clouds boil past the cold sweating pane/ above the Gulf”(106). The aerial view is combined with an acute sense perception which serves to heighten the sense of alienation. This is also evident as Walcott watches the New York streetscape through a high window in “A Village Life” where he says, “Through the wide, grey loft window, /I watched that winter morning of my first snow/ crusting the sill, puzzle the black

/muzzling tom”(79-80). Katie Jones in Land and Sea summarizes Walcott’s window viewing as:

The pane of glass which separates him from human contact implies a clarity of vision . . . but there is a constant metamorphosis whereby the ordinary becomes extraordinary by the quasi-magical power of art and the synthesizing power of the poetic imagination. (39-40)

A complexity sets in when Walcott begins to see people through the glass or objects from the past. He writes in “Another Life” Chapter VII, Section 1, “I saw, as through the glass of some provincial gallery/ the hieratic objects which my father loved: / The stuffed dark nightingale of Keats“(183). Thus the window also becomes a source of gazing into the past, much like a wizard’s crystal ball or a time machine. A relationship is established between child gazing and the adult perspective. And the divided consciousness of the Colonised and the Coloniser become synthesized in the same vision.

In “Lines in New England” he says, “I watch from my side of the glass the lantern/ slides clicking across the window glazed by/ ocean air, mine, or another history there? A / civilization with its dreams of guilt” (49). Moving beyond himself he concludes, “And since that winter I have learnt to gaze / on life indifferently as through a pane of glass” (80). This is an idea that Kamau Braithwaite extends in “Indigone” when he talks of his dead ancestor, “Still burning in a room he’d left and still lay / in a window open on his face so we could see / and not see him could recognize and not know him” (97). In these lines the window frame becomes almost like the movie screen showing a replay of Caribbean slave history and immigrations from Africa. The poet is projected as an active participant on to the screen, and the audience become the actors whereas the observers, become the observed.

Sometimes the reader feels that when Walcott's gaze is at its most acute, there is a focal point at the heart of his vision which blocks out sight instead of facilitating it. In "A Village Life" he says:

But that stare, frozen,
a frosted pane in sunlight,
gives nothing back by letting nothing in,
. . .
No self-reflection lies
Within those silent, ice blue irises. (80)

There seems to be an inherent blind spot within the heart of visibility. This creates a sense of voluntary insulation, so much so that there is, "a drifting petal fallen in a cup / with nothing but its image, / you sway, reflecting nothing" (128). Lacan's concept of the gaze also records the description of such a blind spot, which he calls 'La Tache', the blot or the stain. He explains it as, "a point that cannot be encompassed within the gaze, that blocks interpretation while at the same time pointing to a lack that organizes a subject" (qtd in Barglow 4). Whereas in Lacan the stain is associated with a lack of understanding, Walcott's gaze seems to point to a heightened awareness and sensibility of surroundings which lies beyond expression.

A close examination of Walcott's poetry (1948-84) indicates that in addition to the eyes of animate objects there are many 'false eyes' or objects which either approximate the eye, or have eyes painted on them. It is through these false eyes that Walcott explores the independence of the gaze and the eye.

In the natural world these 'Ocelli' or false painted eyes on certain species of insects in the natural world are used for offensive and defensive purposes. Lacan discusses the psychological implications of such manifestations of false eyes which:

may remind us of the function of the
[real] eyes. . . it is a question of
understanding whether they impress .

. . by their resemblance to eyes, or
whether on the contrary, the eyes are
fascinating only by virtue of their
relation to the 'form' of the Ocelli.
(qtd in Barglow 6)

The distinction made by Lacan in these lines is of two types of intimidation that result from the Ocelli's resemblance to the eye. The first type of intimidation results from the Ocelli's resemblance to the eye of larger predatorial animals which falls into the category of mimicry, and is a defense mechanism by which certain types of animals or fish defend themselves from predators. However another reaction is also evident, and that is that the circular fixed form has a hypnotic effect. The fascination with the circle is intimidating in its fascinating attraction for the viewer. The gaze leaves the limits of the eye or Ocelli, and reaches the viewer encompassing him in an ambivalent attraction – intimidation response which has a hypnotic effect.

Although we do not find false eyes painted on insects or fishes in Walcott's poems, there are numerous 'false eye' images which perform a similar function of creating the distinction between the eye and the gaze. In "Another Life" Walcott writes about the cat-like eyes of a yellow paper flower and, "that stain, familiar as warts or some birth mark, / as the badge of some loved defect" (156).

Walcott is greatly attracted to the circular form which has a hypnotic effect as "a lemon glare" (298) of "Sunday Lemons", and the 'senex' or oak tree, "with its two eyes,/through the boles of this tree" (341). In "Dark August" a reference to the sun is made and its "forehead of flowers and eyes of forgiveness" (329). The distinction between the eye and the gaze becomes more obvious with "as if dusk were myopic, not his gaze" (147). Small Ocelli are replaced with, "the sea's huge eye stuns you / with the lumbering, oblique blow / of its weary, pelagic eyelid" (198). And even the "empty eye-pockets / of green buccaneers" (386) seem to look from the depths of the sea. The repetition of the 'o' on the printed page also has the hypnotic effect of the circle and the eye in "old

house, old woman, old room / old planes, old buckling membranes of the womb” (155). Roger Callois in Medusa and Company writes, “man fears the eye whose look stupefies, affixes to the ground, and suddenly steals away consciousness, will and movement” (qtd in Barglow).

As Walcott’s gaze acquires its independence from the eye it goes beyond the limits of the visual to the tactile as in, “In silence, / the revered silent objects ring like glass, / at my eyes’ touch, everything tightened, tuned” (153-4). It also acquires an appetite for the artistic with, “The eyes sweat, small fires gnaw / at the edge of a canvas” (197). And occasionally, the gaze displays a tender possession as in “Guyana” where Walcott says, “You are folded in my eyes” (122).

Therefore at times in Walcott’s poetry (1948-84) the eyes are pinned down by children as in “A Lesson for this Sunday”, experimenting on a butterfly where, “Brother and sister, with a common pin. . . The little surgeon pierces the thin eyes” (38). But at the same time ,the gaze revels in its freedom as in “Mid Summer” XVIII where the poet states, “The eye was the only truth, and whatever traverses / the retina fades when it darkens; the depth of nature morte / was that death itself is only another surface / like the canvas, since painting cannot capture thought” (478).

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Appendix G

Comments of Dr. Munawar Ahmad Chaudhry: during personal interview, on 26th July, 2001:

The Gaze of a person speaks for itself and reveals the secrets of human psychology in different situations. It is the true reflection of someone's personality. The Gaze is the outward manifestation of the internal tornados and tides which otherwise are disguised within the layers of conscious control. According to psychology there are six types of gaze which characterize various personality types.

1. Fixed gaze
2. Labile (Shifting gaze)
3. Pin Point Gaze
4. Anxious Gaze
5. Depressed Gaze
6. Unequal Gaze

Fixed Gaze

- a. A fixed gaze which remains static at a particular point may speak about a person having **SCHIZOPHRENIA**. Schizophrenia is the state of a psychologically disturbed person who thinks others to be enemies conspiring against him.
- b. A fixed gaze is also an indication of trauma to a person's head who is in a state of shock.
- c. A fixed gaze also indicates death.
- d. A sincere, obedient servant of God will also have his gaze fixed at the site of prostration.

Labile

- a) A labile, shifting or unfixable gaze fills the drunken state of a person who has dilated eyes.
- b) A labile gaze may also be of the person who is extremely shy and cannot continue prolonged eye contact. This person may be a liar, a thief, or a culprit, who will not look someone in the eye and will keep changing his gaze.

Pinpoint Gaze

A Pinpoint gaze refers to the gaze with a papillary opening and a pinpoint focus that is usually indicative of a narcotic who has taken opium or heroine.

Anxious Gaze

An anxious person has anxious eyes and an anxious gaze. It reveals mental hyperactivity and an overly kinetic condition of his mind. His gaze is jerky, not under complete control, and shifting here and there every moment.

Depressed Gaze

A person in depression has a sluggish gaze with heavy eyelids, half open eyes, and slow body moments. His eyes wander, searching for his destination on unknown horizons.

Such a type of gaze can also be seen in a person with more or less the same symptoms of one who has just been awoken from deep sleep by some external stimulus.

Unequal Gaze

An unequal gaze is one in which the eyes deviate from each other without having any parallel synchronization. This type of gaze is manifested in a person who has either a convergent or a divergent squint.