

Re-Mapping the New World: The Recent Poetry of Derek Walcott

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TO MAP IS TO ENGAGE in the transference of one set of features to another, more abstracted set which nonetheless describes the former impressions or locus. Mapping reveals the tensions between representations and the represented. The map is both metaphor and interpretation, in which pertinent elements are transferred from one continuum to another. Mapping is then parallel to the function of language and poesis, or the “making” of something resulting from the attention and engagement with what has been observed. The map is seldom, if ever, private; instead it is a shared (or has the intention of being a shared) set of directions or understanding which is nonetheless open, amendable, and incomplete. Implicit in mapping is the role of the mapmaker, who is both traveller and interpreter. The traveller provides links between places and words, yet those links are at best, by the very nature of travelling, provisional.

Derek Walcott’s recent poetry is one of travelling and mapping where history becomes the knowledge only places can give. “North and South,” the central poem of his *The Fortunate Traveller* (a collection which, not incidentally, is divided into three sections, where two sections titled “North” straddle the central “South”), describes the tensions between the two poles. History becomes defined by the dialectic of these two places. Walcott foresees no resulting synthesis, except the holocaustic. The “white glare / of the white rose of inferno” (11) merges the analogical mystery of Dante’s celestial white rose with imminent extinction. Yet, if the “North,” with its history of colonialism and exploitation, is “sown with salt” and marked for a pre-figured destruction, the “South” and Walcott’s role as the voice

of the place, is ambiguous: "I accept my function / as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire, / a single, circling, homeless satellite" (11). The poetic process calls into question perception and the common assumptions that attend our perceptions:

Now, at the rising of Venus — the steady star
that survives translation, if one can call this lamp
the planet that pierces us over indigo islands — (11)

These opening lines to "North and South" state an ambivalence about the very act of naming the planet since its light (and the name's tradition or context) violently "pierces us." The seemingly lyrical "indigo" turns against the poet and lyricism in that it recalls the early crop of the New World plantations. What in language can survive translation, and thus elude the paradoxes, ambiguities, and hollowness the poet confronts?

The "North" and the "South" are not in utter contrast; instead one is overlaid with a history of imprisonment, while the other remains ambivalent. The history of imprisonment is literal, for Walcott refers to such obvious places of internment as Treblinka and the one-time slave state of Virginia. Imprisonment is also figurative, for the "North" is a prisoner of its own history and still acts upon impulses which created such a devastating history:

[. . .] and when
I collect my change from a small-town pharmacy,
the cashier's fingertips still wince from my hand
as if it would singe hers — well, yes, *je suis un singe*,
I am one of that tribe of frenetic or melancholy
primates who made your music for many more moons
than all the silver quarters in the till. (16)

Even the language imprisons in that one's consciousness is defined by language, the speaker's consciousness makes the analogy between action, history, and the pun. The ever-present and omnipotent language remains, even in the "South" after the departure of the colonialists: "It's good that everything's gone, except their language, / which is everything" (11). History becomes defined by place, yet only insofar as place is a significant marker in language. "[E]verything" resonates as that which imprisons — all the social and political power structures and antagonisms are

still in place in that they are still in the language. Furthermore, “everything” is that which ironically allows the poem to be written — it is the language that Walcott has chosen to write in. Poetry comes to be written out of the lack of innocence any language has. The lack of innocence also defines history. There is no new world, rather the world is historical, its knowledge mapped and thus given to being repeated:

Fragments of paper swirl round the bronze general
of Sheridan Square, syllables of Nordic tongues
(as an Obeah priestess sprinkles flour on the doorstep
to ward off evil, so Carthage was sown with salt);
the flakes are falling like a common language
on my nose and lips, and rime forms on the mouth,
of a shivering exile from his African province. . . . (12)

The possibility of a “common language” as an authentic, collective, and originary language is irremediable. However, a divided language in which historical moments reflect each other and hence become common (and commonplace) does constitute this version of a “common language.” Historical forces continue and thus serve as interpretations of the present. In this way, the present is always mediated by historical knowledge. The emphasis on place, indicated by the title, binds us to this vision of knowledge — no different form exists, Walcott suggests, except that of lack.

Historical knowledge forms the basis of self-definition. In “North and South,” the speaker is an exile “from his African province” and from the “South,” as he finds himself on “the side streets of Manhattan” (11) and “Under the blue sky of . . . Virginia” (14). Exile is existential and provisional, the “South” itself is marked by slavery, colonialism, and exile:

How far I am from those cacophonous seaports
built round the single exclamation of one statue
of Victoria Regina! These vultures shift on the roof
of the red iron market, whose patois
is brittle as slate, a gray stone flecked with quartz. (13)

Like Sheridan, Victoria Regina, symbol of the Empire, is the exclamatory center of movement as if nothing had changed, where, in “Roman Outposts,” Walcott remarks “The same

tides rise and fall, / froth, the moon's lantern hung in the same place" (28). History, as a force of decline and exploitation, remains unchanged and unchangeable. Walcott's description of slate, "a gray stone flecked with quartz" (13), reveals the desire that language, and particularly naming, could offer a stay against the erosiveness of history and time. This stay, not an invocation of stasis, is the desire for precision in seeing and naming, and in turn, of self-definition. The "South" — language and place — is still one of potential, one which "crusts and blackens on the pots / of this cooked culture, coming from a raw one" (13). This physical, cooked language of the "South" (punning and reversing Levi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked*, but suggesting the intertextuality and movement of myth and language) contrasts with the "North"'s "free-verse nightingale . . . trilling 'Read me! Read me!' / in various metres of asthmatic pain" (13).

History, in the "North," can be defined, as in the title poem "The Fortunate Traveller," as "not Anno Domini: After Dachau" (94). Though the speaker in "North and South" may "prefer the salt freshness of that ignorance" (13) of history, the "North" has designed the apocalypse:

The heart of darkness is not Africa.
 The heart of darkness is the core of fire
 in the white center of the holocaust.
 The heart of darkness is the rubber claw
 selecting a scalpel in antiseptic light,
 the hills of children's shoes outside the chimneys. . . . (93-94)

Like Conrad and Rimbaud, Walcott investigates the knowledge of evil and how its action is repeated; indeed the speaker in "The Fortunate Traveller" names this as his special study — "I taught the Jacobean anxieties: *The White Devil*" (91). The notion that one can be a fortunate traveller reveals the banality of evil, which allows the thought "who cares how many million starve?" (92). The speaker, an Iscariot, understands his motives, and reveals an utter pessimism which is apocalyptic: "the weevil will make a sahara of Kansas, / the ant shall eat Russia" (97). History becomes a monolithic force with a fixed teleology. Each previous moment in-forms the next, which is

essentially a re-interpretation of the previous, as exemplified by Walcott's self-reflexive allusion to Conrad's "heart of darkness." The world is language; in so being, it is reiterative, inscriptive, and interminable until silenced. These self-reflexive allusions (suggestive of the entrapment of reiteration and the ambiguity of presence) do not indicate a deep structure of impersonal myth that describes modernist thought, such as Eliot, Yeats, and Joyce. There is no severed order which we must return to or recollect; instead the allusions reveal dialectical tensions descriptive of language.

Walcott's use of the traveller reinforces the uncertainty of one's place and identity. Unlike an allegorical quest or journey, the idea of travel suggests no certain destination or goal. The spiritual growth implicit in the quest motif transforms the pilgrim into an emblem; in travels, the traveller retains personality and a social discourse, as opposed to marking the necessity of an allegorical exegesis. Walcott's traveller, like Elizabeth Bishop's travellers, is a personal voice mapping its particularized worlds. Bishop, as Jerome Mazzaro has described her poetics (166-98), portrays the world in a conjectural scepticism of any evolutionary progress or optimism. Like Bishop, Walcott attempts to formulate an ethical vision which incorporates the character as voice or persona with a moral view. Yet, also like Bishop's vision, Walcott's speakers cannot foresee any escape outside the provisional moment from the steady erosiveness of history. Unlike Bishop, Walcott, particularly in poems like "The Fortunate Traveller," posits a vision of the end in that his is a poetry not only "After Dachau" but a nuclear poetry.

To write poetry under not only the shadow of Auschwitz's chimneys but also the nuclear shadow necessitates the reassessment of history and its expression. The shadow of nuclear arms and destruction creates a new form of intimidation, exploitation, and colonialism. Under it, Walcott understands that we all join the quotas of the Final Solution. Furthermore, our knowledge implicates us in the empowerment of nuclear hegemonies. The nuclear umbrella forms a new colonialism; and the teleology of nuclear war becomes the interpretive denominator of Revelation, Webster, Rimbaud, Conrad, and Kafka among Walcott's literary

referents. A nuclear *telos* dominates the poetics of the "North"; whereas the poetics of the "South" is beginning its history. Language is still generative, for "At the end of this sentence, rain will begin. / At the rain's edge, a sail" (25). The eye scans the sentence in "The Map of the New World," travelling to points beyond any periodicity. However, in this map and in the mapped place, the rain turns into a "drizzle" which "tightens like the strings of a harp." In turn, "A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain / and plucks the first line of the *Odyssey*" (25), which is itself a request to be told and to be inspired to tell the history of the consummate traveller, Odysseus.

The map of the new world is inscribed with the routes of the old world whose "flame has left the charred wick of the cypress; / the light will catch these islands in their turn" (27). In these poems of the "South," Walcott has transposed archaic Greece on the Caribbean; such a palimpsest is a mapping of the poet's memory or his own self-defining history:

In the first years, when your hair
was parted severely in the Pompeian style,
you resembled those mosaics
whose round eyes
keep their immortal pinpoints, or were,
in laughing days, black olives on a saucer. (27)

The "South" is Walcott's own topos and map, and in this, the place where his poetry becomes most confessional and self-reflexive in its confessionalism. In the two sections titled "North," his voice is distinctly distanced — observant but not participatory. In the section "South," Walcott's self emerges often as the lyrical "I," reflecting his own place in relationship to his wife, daughters, and friends. Though the relationships have undergone transformations, such as divorce, they are not marked with the pessimism of the "North" nor are they meditations on the historical *telos* of the "North." Again from "Early Pompeian," Walcott meditates on the loss of a daughter in a premature birth; the cataclysm of Pompey shadows the image of mother and still-born daughter:

I shall let it pass like a torch along a wall
on which there is fadingly set,

stone by fading stone,
 the face of an astonished girl, her lips, her black hair parted
 in the early Pompeian style. (75)

There is "hope of the resurrection" through desire or poiesis. In recognition of such limitations and moreover of the assumption of writing about such an experience (in that writing distances and renders abstract), Walcott asks "Pardon the pride I have taken / in a woman's agony" (77). If the "North" is inscribed as a culture by its holocausts, then in the "South," the personal is also inscribed by these same archetypal cataclysms.

The historical defines or maps the personal and the social. Walcott, however, paradoxically reveals a mistrust and rejection of this mapping. In "From This Far," he rebukes the Greek modernist, George Seferis, who sought to carry over classical Greek mythology into the twentieth century:

The sky's window rattles
 at gears raked into reverse;
 but no stone head rolls in the ocher dust,
 in the soil of our islands no gods are buried.
 They were shipped to us, Seferis,
 dead on arrival. (29)

The dead gods — whether tradition's "cargo of marble heads; / from Orpheus to Onassis" (29) or African customs lost during the centuries of slave trade and whose very methods of transport were designed to dismember cultures — instill our consciousness with their representations: history is thus the perception of the repetition, redundancy, and reiteration of traces or re-presentations. To remark that the parting of the hair is early Pompeian or to invoke Odysseus functions as a reading, a transferal of representations, or a mapping to make sense of the present (yet, then, mediating the present as well as portending loss in the very desire for presence). Walcott cannot, unlike Seferis, align the past and a re-presentation of the present through the past:

I stayed with my own. I starved my hand of names,
 no tan fauns leapt over my wrist,
 I'll never see Piraeus repeat her white name in water,
 but whether my eyes will be white seeds in a bust,
 or, likelier, the salt fruit of worms,

they are sockets whose hollows boast
 those flashes of inward life,
 from the head's thunder-lit storms. (32)

This would seem the desired poetics of the "South" — to stay with one's own and not appropriate (or conversely be appropriated by if that were possible) another tradition, particularly one which has served as the symbolic base of the culture which has enslaved and colonized. Implicit in this final stanza of "From This Far" — a title which incidentally connotes temporal and spatial distance and observation — is the necessity of a self-defining poetics, a personal voice distinct from the impersonalism of modernism which sought, in the poetics of Seferis or Eliot for example, a conservative cultural collectivity or totalizing mythology. By starving his hand of names, Walcott rejects the map offered by modernism, which sought to find solutions or humanity within a culture that was edging toward a vacuum of ethics and vision through the use of those very same cultural symbols, thus reflexively allowing no possibility but Dachau and the failure of modernism. Walcott, in "South," suggests that his poetics will move toward the mapping of landscape, the self and the particular. In this way, he, like Bishop, John Ashbery, and Seamus Heaney, for example, swerves away from modernism.

Midsummer, Walcott's most recent collection of poems, moves fully into the "South": "the sea glares like zinc. /Then, in the door light: not Nike loosening her sandal, / but a girl slapping sand from her foot, one hand on the frame" (xxv). Walcott's line has expanded, usually carrying twelve or thirteen syllables, which extends beyond even the sustained pentameter of "The Spoiler's Return." Walcott's more expansive and travelled line, which is sustained throughout *Midsummer*, suggests another form of rupture or ambivalence toward the traditional poetics of the language he writes in, which is his mirror and map. Walcott increasingly seeks to site himself and history in the present, not to deconstruct or depoliticize the present, but to map its tensions traced in language. Yet, as Walcott creates a poetry of self-definition, he ironically moves away from any political recognition of the language used by the marginal, the exploited, or the other — the patois or demotic forms and tonal ranges. Earlier

poems such as "Sainte Lucie" began to explore these possibilities; however, this was transformed into the more decorous mode of dramatic monologues or narrative poems such as "The Schooner *Flight*" and "The Spoiler's Return," where the language, like the narrator, is masked and thus mediated.

The poems of *Midsummer* arguably acquiesce to the conventions and poetics of the language of the colonialists in the rejection of the patois. One wonders if Walcott does not then become a "North" American poet rather than an Antillean poet. In turn, in what ways does the more personal (and self-defining) poetry of *Midsummer* abrogate the very process of self-definition in the acquisition and maintenance of the conventions of a colonialist's culture. One may ask for whom Walcott's maps are intended. Walcott may move geographically to the "South" in a poem like "Tropic Zone"; however, he has become not a resident but a displaced person, the radical version of the traveller:

A rusty sparrow alights on a rustier rain gauge
in the front garden, but every squeak addresses
one in testy Spanish. "Change to a light shirt. A
walk on our beach should teach you our S's
as the surf says them. You'll recognize hovels,
rotting fishnets. Also why a white dory was shot
for being a gringo." I go back upstairs,
for so much here is the Empire envied and hated
that whether one chooses to say "*ven-thes*" or "*ven-ces*"
involves the class struggle as well. So, be discreet. (XLIII)

Walcott self-reflexively places himself in the role of the traveller, yet also the guide and rememberer. The distinctions of pronunciation inscribe one in a social discourse which is an implicit self-definition. Walcott describes the difficulties of appropriating a language which he has been historically denied. His task, throughout his poetry, is the double-bind of recreating the language to express his own experience. By describing himself as a traveller, he is at once outside the tradition, yet able to re-map the tradition according to his own vision:

These poems I heaved aren't linked to any tradition
like a mossed cairn; each goes down like a stone
to the seabed, settling, but let them, with luck, lie
where stones are deep, in the sea's memory. (L)

Walcott invokes the sea as memory and as a contrast to tradition. "The midsummer sea," Walcott says, is what "made me" and it, with all the other images of his originary place, "are in the blood" (LIV). Walcott suggests there is a collectivity which all authentic language (that is, language which is as a social discourse rich and complex or copious) would inscribe — "a scepter / swayed by the surf, the scansion of the sea" (XLVIII) where "the sea's silver language shines like another era, / and, seasick of poverty, my mind is out there" (XLIX). The sea becomes the site of inspiration and, in its inherently protean state, mirrors the potential that language and the self contain. The sea, writing, and interconnection converge. Walcott self-reflexively describes the correspondence of different movements which are interlinked not only through the attention of the poet but by the activity of movement and duration itself:

Now, when I rewrite a line,
 or sketch on the fast-drying paper the coconut fronds
 that he did so faintly, my daughters' hands move in mine.
 Conches move over the ocean floor. I used to move
 my father's grave from the blackened Anglican headstones
 in Castries to where I could love both at once —
 the sea and his absence. (L)

He contemplates three generations linked in the movement across the page, "the soundless singing of angels" or the oceanic echoes within the conches, the sea, and absence. Absence or death is never complete, for there exists some traced movement which continues and remembers. Walcott's poetry of *Midsummer*, with its connotation of a season and a life half-over or half-way complete, thus meditates on the possibility of interconnection through the self-reflexive traces of language rather than the ambivalence of adopting a particular set of poetic conventions.

Walcott refers to painting and painters — in the sections titled "Gauguin" and "Watteau" as well as of his father who was a watercolorist and his own work — to suggest the increased attention to visual perception found in his use of figurative language. The extended line allows him to look more closely, thus to particularize his landscape as part of the process of self-definition and the insistence for presentness. Unlike modernist poetics, which in

the use of an abstracted landscape invokes a collective myth or order, Walcott's voicing of Gauguin indicates a rejection of abstraction and idealization: "No, what I have plated in amber is not an ideal, as / Puvis de Chavannes desired it, but corrupt" (xix). Walcott's seeing is temporal and durational; it is the showing of its own mutability and thus avoids sentimentalization and abstraction. To demonstrate this, Walcott ironically contemplates the possibility of a synchronic and idealizational language:

Ah, to have
 a tone colloquial and stiff,
 the brevity of that short syllable, God
 all synthesis in one heraldic stroke,
 like Li Po or a Chinese laundry mark! Walk
 these hot streets, their signs a dusty backdrop stuck
 to the maundering ego. The lines that jerk
 into step do not fit any mold. More than time
 keeps shifting. Language never fits geography
 except when the earth and summer lightning rhyme. (ix)

The ironic expression, "Ah, to have," reveals the quality of appropriation in a synchronic, gazing language, where the world, the other, and the self are consumed by a symbol. Instead of synthesis, poetry must, as the end word "Walk" emphasizes, move dialectically and dialogically. Movement between self and other, in its activeness, cannot "fit any mold." Language cannot be contained within a map; instead, as Elizabeth Bishop wrote, "The names of seashore towns run out to sea" (3). Time and language, like the places of the speaker and the reader, are always in the process of shifting. The mysterious is the imagination, "the lightning, like the swift note of a swallow on the staff / of four electric wires" (ix), as when,

Midsummer bursts
 out of its body, and its poems come unwarranted
 as when hearing what sounds like rain we startle a place
 where a waterfall crashes down rocks. Abounding grace! (viii)

Nonetheless, Walcott, like his version of Gauguin, has "never pretended that summer was paradise" (xix) nor the "South" an ideal. Instead, his concern is that the Caribbean "under the

tree of knowledge, / forgets that he's Adam" (XLIII), with the potential of not repeating history, of not duplicating old maps, but of re-mapping. The use of traditional conventions and allusions suggests the impossibility of creating a wholly new map. These allusions serve as scales and exempla which, redefined, can recompose or re-map without the goal of establishing the definitive chart or giving way to abstractions which forget place and self and thus terminate discourse and travel. The map becomes a memory and public record which can be interpreted, which interprets, and which is a means of generating new interpretations. As a traveller, Walcott finds no easeful habitation in place or language, and thus understands their provisionality and sea-change.

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